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Kuji Furumiya

Illustration by chibi

Unnamed & Memory

Prayer of
Silence

Table of Contents

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Character Profiles](#)

[1. Shellwork Memory](#)

[2. Moon Crystals](#)

[3. Returning the Promise](#)

[4. The Crystal Orb™'s Enchanted Sleep](#)

[5. Contagious Hopes](#)

[6. Bloodless Scars](#)

[7. A Happy Kind of Sadness](#)

[8. Finding a Seed](#)

[9. The Present According to the Future](#)

[10. Half of Eternity](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Extra: Perchance to Dream](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

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Unnamed
Memory

Prayer
of Silence

V



“...Excuse
me?”

“I want
you.
So I’m
asking
you to
marry
me.”

Contents

1. Shellwork Memory
2. Moon Crystals
3. Returning the Promise
4. The Crystal Orb's
Enchanted Sleep
5. Contagious Hopes
6. Bloodless Scars
7. A Happy Kind of Sadness
8. Finding a Seed
9. The Present According
to the Future
10. Half of Eternity
- Afterword



Unnamed Memory

Prayer of Silence

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NEW YORK

Copyright

Unnamed Memory

Volume 5

Kuji Furumiya

Translation by Sarah Tangney

Cover art by chibi

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UNNAMED MEMORY Vol. 5 INORI E TO ITARI CHIMMOKU

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Character Profiles](#)

[1. Shellwork Memory](#)

[2. Moon Crystals](#)

[3. Returning the Promise](#)

[4. The Crystal Orb's Enchanted Sleep](#)

[5. Contagious Hopes](#)

[6. Bloodless Scars](#)

[7. A Happy Kind of Sadness](#)

[8. Finding a Seed](#)

[9. The Present According to the Future](#)

[10. Half of Eternity](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Extra: Perchance to Dream](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

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Character Profiles

Farsas

Oscar

The current king of the Kingdom of Farsas. Bearer of the legendary royal sword Akashia, which can neutralize magic.

Lazar

Oscar's childhood friend and a royal attendant. A young man who has been through a lot in the service of his lord.

Als

A general. The youngest general and an eminently capable officer. Oscar's sparring partner.

Kav

A mage. A very inquisitive young man who doesn't shy away from Tinasha.

Sylvia

A mage. A beautiful blond woman who is sweet and kind but a little ditzy.

Doan

A mage. A talented young man who is well-known to be next in line for the position of royal chief mage.

Tuldarr

Tinasha

A spirit sorcerer. After sleeping for four hundred years, she is working with Oscar to break his curse.

Mila

A mystical spirit who serves Tinasha. A beautiful young girl with crimson hair and eyes.

Calste

The current king of the Magic Empire of Tuldarr. He's quite young for a king and possesses a gentle countenance.

Legis

The prince of Tuldarr and Calste's only son. A young man with light-blond hair.

Renart

Legis's personal court mage from Tayiri.

Pamyra

An exceptional spirit sorcerer who serves Tinasha. Renart's friend.

Others

Valt

A mage who seems to know something about the magic orbs that can warp time.

Miralys

A silver-haired young girl who is secretly working with Valt to execute a mysterious plan.

Lavinia

Also known as the Witch of Silence. The person who originally cursed Oscar.

Travis

The highest-ranking demon. Capricious and unpredictable, he occasionally shows up to engage with Tinasha.

Aurelia

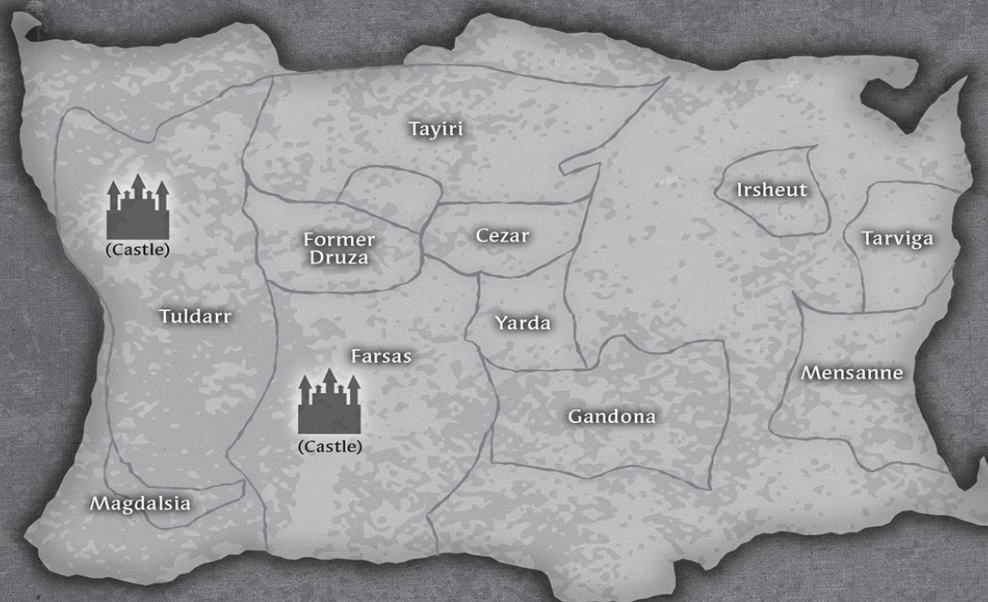
A girl belonging to the royal family of Gandona. After her parents' death, Travis became her guardian.

Phaedra

A high-ranking demon who is extremely attached to Travis.

The Lands of *Unnamed Memory*

Current Year: 1654 (526 by Farsas historical reckoning)



Once, mages were called fiends and suffered oppression and unhappiness.
A country built by mages changed the fate of all their kind shunned by others.

It was the Magic Empire of Tuldarr.

The protector of mages and deterrer of forbidden curses.

With its twelve mystical spirits, Tuldarr has raised
powerful mages into rulers for generations.

In the nine hundred years since its founding,
this country still stands as the most
mysterious in all the lands.

1654

■ 1. Shellwork Memory

“Once I’m dead, you’ll know for the first time what I was and what you are.”

“What, Father?” the young man asked, stunned by his father’s sudden declaration at the dinner table. He paused while bringing a spoonful of soup to his mouth. “What’s this all about? Why are you talking about dying?”

“You’ll know soon enough,” his father answered dismissively. “This world has a way of balancing the books to make up for how things were altered. One person’s salvation means another’s downfall, and one country’s glory ensures another’s decline. Ultimately, it will all converge on a future that’s not so different from how it should have been.”

The words seemed like nonsense. The son opened his mouth to inquire further, but the father held up a hand to stop him. “Stay quiet and just listen to me. Anyway, won’t shooting for that convergence mean we wind up with a future that’s totally immutable? This present that we’re in now, the one that was so far in the future for the people of the ancient past, is still being altered. Humans will keep challenging themselves for all eternity—so long as those orbs exist.”

“Orbs?”

“They possess a terrible power and keep sticking pins in the world. With every new prick, the world is dismantled and forced to reconstruct itself based on washed-up memories. It must be profoundly agonizing for the world. And we are the only ones who know of that pain.”

The young man didn’t interrupt his father’s story. He stayed silent, as an odd feeling settled over the room.

“The world cannot tolerate its memory being overwritten forever. But what it will truly become unable to suffer is us. In the end, we are mere mortals. Our minds are fragile. Our lot is to be used as tools and cast aside... No, we are eternal slaves who are never allowed to be thrown away.”

His voice took on a resentful tone. He wasn’t shouting, but his words shook with a deep fury.

The father was swift to rein in that anger before his son. And as he stared at his child, he went on. “The world is waiting for one last straw.

That which will undo all the interventions and restore it to its original shape.”

There was an emptiness in his eyes as he whispered the words. Then he dropped his gaze to his knees. “But that won’t happen in my lifetime.”

Heavy despair showed through in that pronouncement. By the time his son finally understood the meaning of his words...

By the next day, his father had hanged himself on a tree in the garden.

※

Farsas Castle was a massive structure. Inhabitants frequently couldn’t see the ends of the hallways they traveled along. Unlike the castle in Tuldarr, which had been expanded and added onto many times since the nation’s founding, Farsas’s had been designed to be huge from the start.

“Must be because it was built over an underground lake,” said a stunningly beautiful woman with black eyes and hair as she made her way down a hall.

Passing magistrates and ladies-in-waiting turned their heads to look at her, despite knowing it was rude. In her eyes, as dark and mysterious as a moonless night, they found only the pronounced innocence of a girl.

Clad in a white mage’s robe, she sauntered down the long hallway with arms crossed, when a bright feminine voice called out from behind her.

“Princess Tinasha!”

She turned at the sound of nearing footsteps and spied two familiar mages. “Sylvia and Doan,” she greeted them.

The blond woman who had called out grinned and curtsied, while the calm young man next to her gave a bow. Both were mages who served the court of Farsas and were relatively close with Tinasha, even though she was a visitor from a bordering country.

Sylvia glanced down at Tinasha’s feet. “What happened to your shoes?”

“Shoes?” Tinasha asked, following Sylvia’s gaze. Her ivory feet were bare, floating a little above the ground. Her eyes widened in surprise as she raked a hand through her black hair. “I didn’t even notice. I was too deep in thought.”

“Your research?” Sylvia questioned.

The most likely target of a mage’s focused concentration would be their own magic research.

The future queen of Farsas’s neighbor, the Magic Empire of Tuldarr, nodded. “I’m a little stuck on something... but I think I’ll figure it out soon.”

“Ah, I know what that must be,” said Doan, alluding to the most highly classified secret in all of Farsas.

When the young king of Farsas was a young boy, a witch cursed him. Any woman carrying his child would die before the child could be born. The curse was so strong that even the royal chief mage *and* the king of Tuldarr

were incapable of undoing it. Tinasha was presently analyzing the magic herself in an attempt to break it.

There were only three witches in all the land, and there were two reasons why Tinasha was qualified to unravel their spells.

The first was that she herself was a former queen of Tuldarr who bore the title of Witch Killer Queen. The other was that she had personally examined a nullified version of that exact curse when she was younger.

A man from four hundred years in the future had come to rescue Tinasha from danger, and he had possessed the impotent version of the curse.

Though he claimed he would be Tinasha's husband one day, in the end, he vanished after saving her. In exchange for sacrificing everything, he rewrote history and Tinasha's fate.

He was also the owner of a royal sword that could nullify magic. His name was Oscar.

In the present age, he was king of Farsas, and now that the past had been altered, he possessed no memory of Tinasha. But she didn't mind.

Tinasha and Oscar were different from the versions who had married each other. They were totally separate people who had met afresh.

That was precisely why she had to be the one to break his curse.

"I need to undo it, but I've hit a snag... I'm looking for one last flash of inspiration," Tinasha explained.

"Ah, right. That last stretch can be tricky," Doan said with a wry grimace. Court mages like him held just about the highest position a mage could reach; there were fewer than five hundred throughout every country combined. The best of them spent much of their time sequestered in research, so Doan sympathized with what it was like to hit a mental wall.

Tinasha floated along barefoot, stretching both her arms up overhead. "I'm really struggling with it... but I know there *has* to be a way within the laws of magic..."

Curses and blessings were constructed from the spell caster's own unique language, but as long as they utilized magic, they were still bound by its rules and limits. No matter how inspired the idea or technology used for the spell was, it shouldn't have been beyond understanding and deconstructing.

Thus, the real challenge came from whatever was working against those laws, rather than from the witch's curse.

The magic orb that had once sent a different Oscar backward in time now lay in the Tuldarr treasure vault, while one of another color was stored in Farsas's treasure vault.

Once someone used the sphere, history would be erased and rewritten with a new timeline that started from the point in time at which the user arrived. What was the original purpose in creating such a devastating thing that went against all laws of magic?

As Tinasha considered it, doubts flooded her mind until it was all she could think about.

"A new law... no, that's not it. They don't contradict one another."

A primary tenet of the laws of magic was that time could not be rewound. It continued to flow. There was leeway to dam its streaming for a bit, but there was no turning it back. That was the letter of the law and the hard-and-fast way the world operated. Past eras existed in memories.

"Then what about overwriting a law with a different one? Or does the orb contain its own unique rules? But where would a different law come from in the first place? Since going back in time is tantamount to reconstructing the entire world..."

"Princess Tinasha, your thoughts are getting a little worrisome," Doan remarked with concern as he walked a step behind her. He would have liked to pretend he hadn't heard anything, and his harsh but honest remark made Tinasha silence her whispering.

Instead, Sylvia piped up in a cheerful voice. Apparently, she hadn't heard anything. "Oh yes, did you know rumors are flying in the city about today's garden party?"

"Garden party? Rumors?" Tinasha repeated.

"Hey, Sylvia...", Doan chided.

Tinasha hadn't been informed of the event. During the two days following her involvement in a conflict with Yarda, one of Farsas's neighbors, Tinasha had been shut up in her room, focusing on analyzing the curse.

While Doan's expression was strained, Sylvia flashed him a grin. "Aww, but it's the talk of the town. The word on the street is that the garden party today might be a way for His Majesty to choose a bride!"

"..."

A long, unpleasant silence fell over the trio. Doan let out a heavy sigh before pasting a professional smile on his face and bowing. "I seem to have recalled something I need to do. I will be taking my leave."

"Hold it," Tinasha called, her voice imbued with power, and Doan was rendered unable to move. The young mage cursed himself for missing his chance to escape earlier.

Tinasha cast him a brilliant grin. "Now that I've heard such interesting news, I insist you tell me all about it."

"The garden party tradition started three generations ago with King Regius. He would invite the city's merchants and artisans to display their pieces and sell their wares," Sylvia explained.

"Oh, so it was a way for him to gather everyone he was keeping an eye on," Tinasha surmised.

"Exactly. It's a potentially life-changing opportunity for dealers, and they promote themselves with everything they have. Very often, a merchant's business explodes after becoming an official provider for the crown," Sylvia went on.

After the trio headed to the lounge to continue their conversation, Sylvia launched into the details of the garden party. Her eyes were dancing, and there wasn't a shred of ill intention in her as she sipped her tea.

"So then it became a chance for the merchants' daughters, who came along to assist their parents, to catch the eyes of noblemen. And remember, our last queen was a commoner herself."

"All of this is just the townsfolk getting themselves all worked up," added Doan, looking resigned. Ordinarily, he didn't like to get himself involved in any sticky disagreements, and he could sense that this was going to put Tinasha in a bad mood. Based on her behavior, it was a reasonable fear. Still, Tinasha was about to take the Tuldarr throne and possessed good judgment.

As Tinasha savored the aroma wafting from her teacup, she asked, "The king first fell in love with Oscar's mother at one of these parties?"

"No, I believe he brought her back to the castle with him one day. He met her after sneaking out for some fun," Doan replied.

"Sneaking out... Like father, like son..."

"As I recall, her family was opposed to the union, so her origins remained a secret. No one from the late queen's family attended her funeral," Sylvia said.

"Hmm..."

Tinasha had a feeling that even Oscar didn't know the whole story.

His mother had been the one to bring the very orb that took him back in time into Farsas. What's more, Oscar had enough magic in him to surpass the average mage, although it was sealed away. The previous king didn't possess a drop of magic, so it was very likely that his mother had been a mage.

Yet while all of that was intriguing, Oscar's mother was dead, and this was all another nation's business. Tinasha knew it wasn't something to concern herself with. It would be a matter for Oscar's future queen to ponder.

Elbows on her knees, Tinasha rested her chin in her hands. "I wonder who he'll marry."

"Princess Tinasha, may I excuse myself? I believe I have a stomachache," Doan said.

"I'm not going to do anything!" she shot back. It was her own fault that the man didn't trust her, but she was displeased that he was so obviously wary.

As Tinasha puffed up her cheeks with indignation, Sylvia clapped her hands together. "I know! Why don't you attend the garden party?"

"What? But I'm a foreign visitor. I think Oscar would get mad if he found me there."

The young king had often urged her not to sneak out on her own, as she was a precious resource. He would undoubtedly be vexed if she made an appearance during a gathering of merchants and artisans.

Tinasha tried to change the subject, but Sylvia waved a hand dismissively. "You just have to not get caught. Oh, I know! You can use a curse song to disguise yourself!"

"Curse songs aren't powerful enough for that... and Oscar will be on guard from the moment I sing," Tinasha objected.

"Then we'll use some other method! Don't old spell books have transformation spells?"

"Transformation spells? I did learn some when I was younger," Tinasha admitted.

The magic altered the physical body itself instead of creating illusions, as curse songs and other techniques did. It was an ancient advanced magic that Tinasha had indeed been instructed in four hundred years ago. However, she only knew the theory behind it, and had never put it into practice.

Tinasha cast back through her memories. "I don't feel capable of changing myself to anything nonhuman... but I could likely manage something simple like changing my age."

"Let's try it, then! I'll get your costume ready! You should pretend to be a town girl and set your sights on marrying the king!" Sylvia chirped.

"But I'm not after that!" Tinasha protested.

"I believe it's time for me to be taking my leave... I don't want to quit my job as court mage just yet," Doan said faintly. In sharp contrast to his discreet worry, Sylvia was in high spirits and bursting with excitement.

Tinasha folded her arms, gazing at the pair. "Only for a little while. I'll leave if it looks like I'm about to get scolded."

"It'll be fine if you don't get caught! Leave it to me!" Sylvia reassured her with totally baseless confidence as she tugged Tinasha out of her seat.

Doan watched them depart the lounge and let out a long sigh as he rubbed at his aching stomach.

※

Later that afternoon, tables and quilts were spread on the grass in the castle courtyard as townspeople who had brought their finest wares bustled about. Rows of crystals glittered on a black cloth next to a stand with a display of elaborately wrought clockwork boxes. All sorts of treasures were on exhibit as the merchants hustled to and fro.

Everyone's greatest hope was to catch the king's fancy, but this event still promised to be a significant business opportunity for them, even if they failed at that. One could still be made a royal purveyor if their goods enticed a castle official. And if they managed to forge a connection with a famous merchant, that could be their ticket to international trade. What kind of opportunity awaited them depended on effort and luck.

For those reasons, all attendees had been highly motivated to make the most scrupulous preparations—including the merchants' daughters, who

aspired to something a bit different. Ostensibly, they were there to assist their families. But they also harbored dreams of a fairy-tale ending, despite knowing it was unlikely.

These girls were visibly excited and restless upon sighting the king in the courtyard. While they didn't squeal or shriek, they shot him looks heavy with longing.

The king's attendant and childhood friend, Lazar, wore a faint smile. "They were at it last year, too, but it seems like there are even more girls this time."

"It'll get out of hand if their numbers continue to increase. I don't have time to search for a bride," Oscar replied while inspecting a nearby table of delicate handmade items. Impressed by the artisan's thorough craftsmanship, he picked up an accessory case. "This is well made. Very interesting. I'll take it."

"Th-thank you very much!" answered the merchant, whose prestige would rise after having sold to the king. Joy was writ large on his face as Lazar handled the purchase. Meanwhile, Oscar slipped the shellwork case into his jacket pocket. That done, his eye turned to other goods.

As he made his way around the courtyard, the palpable sense of anticipation in the air reached a fever pitch. Much of it was coming from the young girls, and Oscar made sure to keep his expression free of the cynical smile that threatened to tug at his lips.

When he'd made his way around half of the sellers, a girl came running up to him from the crowd. Her cheeks were flushed with nervous tension as she curtsied before him. "Would you mind terribly if I accompanied you, Your Majesty?"

The young woman's brazen offer made all the other young women stare at her with shock and envy.

Oscar's eyes widened for a moment, caught off guard as he was, but then he grinned lightly. "I appreciate that, but I'm all right."

"Oh, but...", the girl protested.

"In that case, allow me to accompany you," offered another young lady.

"No, let me—"

The girls began to close in. While the anxious anticipation in the air dissolved, it was now filled with the din of their entreaties, which clearly made the king's guards uneasy.

At a complete loss about what to do, Lazar looked up at Oscar. "Your Majesty..."

He seemed to be suggesting that Oscar take his leave for the moment. For a second, Oscar couldn't decide how to answer him.

Despite the garden party's humble origins, it was an official affair nowadays. The merchants and artisans who attended submitted samples of their wares to the castle ahead of time. The king and royal experts on each type of craft reviewed the application, so there was very little need for Oscar to attend in person and cause a stir.

The dealers were all aware of that. Many of them pursed their lips at the disturbance and turned disapproving looks on the hopeful young women.

As Oscar scanned the crowd, his gaze suddenly landed on a girl standing some distance away in the shade of a tree. Her red hair was tied up in a ponytail, and she wore a white apron. With her freckled face and slightly scuffed wooden clogs, she was the picture of an ordinary town maiden.

But... there was something different in her eyes.

Blazing as they were with some potent, very fierce emotion, those eyes seemed to carry the power to captivate anyone with a single look. She was entirely unlike her peers.

Oscar's gaze narrowed as if against the sunlight. Once he recognized how he couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from her, he sighed quietly.

Turning his attention back to everyone else, he proclaimed, "All right, then. This is a wonderful opportunity for me to show someone around the castle. That said, I can't take everyone."

He looked around at the crowd thoughtfully. Then he beckoned to the girl under the tree. "Yes, you'll do. Come along."

"Um...", the girl said, her expression seizing up. Her eyes darted about, as though hoping to spot an escape. Upon realizing that everyone was staring her way, she pursed her lips.

She looked down and away as her cheeks turned pink. "Thank... you very much. I accept."

The girl made her way through the crowd as others lobbed envious looks at her all the while. She followed half a step behind Oscar, and as they departed this section of the garden, the feverish atmosphere vanished like a wave pulling out to sea. Deflated, those remaining returned to their work. The bustle of activity in the courtyard settled back down to more relaxed levels.

Meanwhile, the king and the young lady were silent as they ventured deeper into the castle gardens.

Once they were out of sight of prying eyes, the girl eked out in a small voice, "Um, Your Majesty... why me?"

"Do I need a reason?"

"No... you do not," she replied, cowering at his retort. Her last bit of hope had vanished, and her pink cheeks turned pale.

Oscar wondered if maybe he shouldn't have said anything. But he knew what he had glimpsed. Once the two reached an open patch of lawn, he sat down on the grass. The girl hurried to take a seat beside him.

The king glanced at that freckled face and then abruptly reached out to pinch one soft cheek. "What's going on here? How did you do this?"

"Ow, ow, ow! Stop it! I just transformed myself with magic!" she confessed, ducking her head to get away from his hand and rubbing at her reddened cheek. "How did you know it was me?"

Altered though it was, Tinasha's face looked as it always did to Oscar. Her innocent eyes were just as spirited. There was no mistaking them.

Oscar met that gaze evenly with a blank look of his own. All sorts of retorts came to mind, but he gave a safe answer in the end. "No amount of magic can hide power as strong as yours. You're giving off the faintest glow."

"Oh... I suppose your intuition was always pretty strong," Tinasha replied, burying her face in her hands. Immediately, her red locks reverted to their original inky black. Her suntanned skin became alabaster, and she dropped her hands. Her face, in all its unparalleled beauty, peered up at Oscar.

The queen who had come from four hundred years ago to save Oscar gave him an abashed, guilty smile. "I'm sorry. I simply wanted a little break."

"You should've just told me, then."

"I also heard you'd be looking for a wife."

"Listen... Don't try to marry me disguised as someone else," he stated gravely. "It'll turn into a diplomatic crisis."

"I wasn't! I just didn't want to get in your way!" Tinasha objected, but her actions spoke differently.

Despite her status as the future queen of Tuldarr, she had taken reckless action time and again to break Oscar's curse while staying in Farsas. She had even used herself as bait in a fight. Naturally, Oscar was always wary of what she might pull next, but he'd assumed she would behave herself with her coronation nearing. Tinasha was the type of person to ultimately prioritize her responsibilities above her own wishes, which was why she would soon be leaving Farsas.

She made a guilty face. "I did get in the way of your work. I'm very sorry."

"It's fine. I was just about to leave anyway," replied Oscar. The garden party was an event his eccentric great-grandfather had started. It held no actual use. Tinasha's presence actually provided Oscar with a chance to leave early.

From his pocket, Oscar drew out the shellwork object he'd purchased earlier and dropped it in Tinasha's lap. "Here."

"What? Is this for me?"

"You've never been to the seashore, right?"

Upon her imminent ascension to the throne, Tinasha would lose a lot of her freedom. While Oscar was a king as well, the court of Farsas was far more open. In contrast, Tuldarr would constantly be policing its queen from a shadowy background.

So he wanted her to feel a sense of freedom in her heart, at least when she looked at that shellwork case. She could remember the brief span of days she'd spent in Farsas while imagining the vast ocean.

Tinasha held the box in her palms and looked it over. The finely wrought ornamentation depicted a girl sitting on a rocky shore playing the lyre while

fish listened, enraptured. Luminescent stones embedded within the piece cast faintly wavering shadows.

Carefully, she wrapped her hands around it. "Thank you so much. I love it."

Next to her, Oscar softened his expression as he watched her with the gift.

Amid this tranquil moment, he sprawled out in the grass and stretched his arms above his head. "Now's a great time for a break. Also, take off those shoes. You can go back barefoot if you teleport to the castle, can't you?"

"Um, I guess... Are you going to take a nap here?"

"Wake me up when you head back," Oscar instructed, but before his eyes could fully close, Tinasha nudged him. Moving his arm away from his eyes to look at her, he saw she was patting her lap.

"You can sleep here. I've got some things to think over for a while anyway."

"Wow," he remarked dryly, giving her a disapproving look for acting so defenseless. They *were* completely alone, however. He could let it slide.

Oscar moved over and lay his head down in Tinasha's lap. When he glanced up, he saw that her face was lit with a strange childlike glee. "What's with that look? Are you going to chop off my head while I'm asleep or something?"

"Of course not. Should that ever be necessary, I'll come at you from head-on."

"Big talk. I'm going to sleep," the king responded, closing his eyes. Tinasha's ivory hands carded through his hair softly. Oscar knew that the faint floral scent she gave off was her own. He breathed it in comfortably.

When he did pass into slumber, there came a brief, wonderful, and laughable dream in which he married an ordinary girl from town.

Oscar nodded off rather quickly, and his breathing evened.

Tinasha gazed down at him. "He didn't get too mad at me..."

The most foolish of hopes had blossomed inside her when his eyes had fallen upon her at the party, but it was only because he'd seen through her disguise. It was a shame that her magic gave her away. Sylvia had been so excited to pick out her clothes.

Careful not to wake the man in her lap, Tinasha slipped off her wooden clogs. She'd never worn their likes before, so her toes and heels were red. Oscar must have guessed that, which was why he told her to remove them. Feeling all mixed up inside, she massaged her heels.

When they were feeling better, Tinasha held the seashell case up and examined it. "So pretty..."

Sunlight and the luminescent stones illuminated the engraved decorations that depicted part of a fairy tale. A girl whose love had gone missing in an accident at sea walked the coast during the day, hoping to find him. Come nightfall, she sang to the fish, asking for any news of him.

Despite her efforts, her sweetheart was never found. When she was nearing the last of her hope, he appeared at last, but his memories were gone. The story went that she found joy in getting to know him again, though she mourned the loss of his recollections to the ocean.

“Starting over...”

It reminded Tinasha of her and Oscar. Unlike in the fairy tale, she and the king of Farsas weren't in love. All that awaited them was a final goodbye.

Because the other Oscar had rescued Tinasha four hundred years ago, they had met again in this era. However, their paths would diverge before long. She could only leave him with the fruits of her labor, the breaking of the curse. It was the materialization of her feelings for him, in a way. Most curses and blessings were laid with an underlying emotion.



“Oh!”

Inspiration abruptly struck Tinasha, and her head snapped up.

Surely this feeling is the final piece to undoing the curse.

The desire to leave something behind. That was what the curse placed on Oscar had desired all along. Inside the spell woven by the Witch of Silence’s own distinct language, there was a further coded portion, the definition name. Even if the curse were broken, that portion would remain. In the curse Tinasha had examined four centuries ago, that bit hadn’t been negated.

The final piece of the spell had to exist to ensure the definition name remained.

“Which means...”

Tinasha looked at Oscar, still asleep with his head in her lap. She wanted to test out her theory right away, but he was resting. If possible, she would prefer to let him relax to make up for his hectic daily schedule.

After thinking for a moment, Tinasha spread her arms wide. A fluffy white blanket appeared between them, and she placed it over the king. Then she closed her eyes and began to contemplate the curse.

※

How long had he been asleep? Judging by the sun’s position, not even an hour had passed.

Oscar craned his neck to look at the girl whose lap he’d been napping on, only to discover that she had nodded off, too. Tinasha’s head was lolling to one side. He’d anticipated that she’d rouse him, yet the young woman had abandoned her post.

Oscar noticed the white blanket laid over him and huffed. “We’re in the castle, but it’s still dangerous if neither of us keeps watch.”

Anything could’ve happened while they were both unawares. However, one of them would have probably awoken had there been trouble.

Oscar spent some time watching Tinasha’s face as she slept, but he couldn’t do that forever. He sat up, placed the blanket over her, and took the girl in his arms. Even that didn’t wake her. Gently, he hugged her more closely.

“Go on and sleep. You are free as long as you’re in Farsas.”

If Tinasha wished it, she could live like a commoner in town. But Oscar knew she’d never do that.

The pair had both been raised for something more. That was why the rare moments of freedom like this one were so precious.

With Tinasha in his arms, Oscar returned to his day.

He didn’t want to count how many days like this she had left.

■ 2. Moon Crystals

It revolved slowly in the air with a solid artistic beauty.

Strands and lines were woven together so minutely. It was the height of intricacy, and Tinasha reached a finger toward it.

Two spells intertwined, canceling each other out, just like what I saw back then.

The opposed forces brought together natures that were averse yet strongly attracted to each other.

Both of them were love, and both of them were hate.

That which devoured from the inside even as it protected, and that which supported even as it caused harm.

Within, Tinasha saw powerful emotions, and she sighed. Fear struck her at the thought that she would soon have to manifest one-half of this pair.

"It's all right."

She wouldn't go back on her promise. Tinasha had slept for four hundred years for this. At the very least, she owed it to him to get it done.

She summoned an array of assorted crystal balls into her hands. Then she began the long recitation to create the magic implements she would need.

※

When Tinasha visited Oscar in his study, he noticed dark circles under her eyes and frowned. Her face had been lined with exhaustion the day before during their practice, too. Censure bled into the king's voice as he inquired, "Are you getting enough sleep?"

"I don't think I've slept in two days."

"Go to bed! Now!" he barked, and she gave a wan smile. Lazar glanced over, concerned.

Tinasha leaned against the wall by the door and held up a hand. "I came to tell you that I've finished the analysis. I'm going to break the curse tonight. Until then, I'm going to take a little nap... so I won't be able to make our training today. Sorry about that."

The news she dropped so casually struck both men dumb. Neither could manage a single word for a moment.

Noticing their reactions, Tinasha grinned and looked away. Neither could be confident if she did so from exhaustion, shyness, or something else entirely. However, it was curiously alluring, and it caught Oscar's gaze.

After sufficient time, he let out a deep sigh. "I didn't think you'd make it before the deadline."

"Of course I did. Anything less would've inconvenienced you, after all."

"You said it would require half a year, but I thought three years for sure."

"Don't just add on time based on a groundless assumption!" Tinasha snapped, pushing off from the wall. She looked unsteady on her feet, which made Oscar regret teasing her.

Biting his tongue to keep himself from prodding her further, he steered the conversation back on course. "So, do you need anything to break the curse?"

"No. I'll do it while you're sleeping, so go to bed early."

"Why do I need to be unconscious?" he asked.

"It's dangerous if you're awake during the spell," Tinasha explained while massaging her temples. It looked like she could pass out at any moment.

Noticing that, Oscar nodded. "All right. Just go get some sleep."

"I'll come to you tonight," she said before teleporting away.

Lazar exhaled, amazed. "It feels like time has passed in a flash. It doesn't seem real yet that Princess Tinasha will be returning to Tuldarr."

"Those were the terms she came here with," Oscar reminded him, his inflection free of sentiment. There was less than a week left until Tinasha's coronation. It was strange for her to still be here so close to the deadline. She had done so to break his curse, but that excuse would be gone after tonight. A profoundly mysterious emotion coursed through Oscar's body.

Impatience, hope, loneliness, worry—no, none of that.

He was unwilling to acknowledge that unnamed sensation, but he did let his thoughts turn to how hard Tinasha had worked to reach this point.

※

Tinasha came to Oscar's chamber an hour after he retired for the night. The color had returned to her face, if only somewhat, likely thanks to her nap during the day. Oscar looked her up and down from his spot next to her on the bed. "Those dark circles aren't going to go away in time for your crowning. Legis might be upset with me."

The future queen dismissed the concern with a smile. "I can use magic to conceal them if they don't." She poked at Oscar's forehead and chest. "Take off your shirt and lie down. Once the spell begins, I don't think you'll

wake up until it's over. But I want you to fall asleep naturally. If I put you to sleep with magic, there will be too many spells going."

"It's not easy to pass out on command," Oscar complained, but he stripped off his shirt obediently and lay faceup on the bed.

"Should I wait until you're unconscious and then come back?" Tinasha asked.

"It'd all be the same. I'd be on edge, subconsciously wondering when you would return."

"That's true. It would be like knowing someone was going to creep into your room... I should have just done the spell without giving you any warning."

"That would have been *very* suspicious, so forget that notion. I'll do my best to fall asleep."

"Thanks."

Both of them closed their eyes, and silence blanketed the room.

Knowing that Tinasha was nearby didn't make Oscar anxious. For as long as he could remember, he'd always been sensitive to the presence of others. This girl was probably the only person who wouldn't keep him up. Perhaps it was because she held her own without growing overly close to him.

Tinasha was the type of ruler who kept her head high and never relied on anyone else. That was who she was, yet in Farsas, she was free to act as she pleased. Maybe that was the reason it felt so natural for her to be at Oscar's side, and why it gave him a sense of relief.

He opened his eyes to see that Tinasha had about twenty small crystal balls spread out in her lap. She picked them up one by one to inspect them carefully.

It looked so much like she was playing a children's game that Oscar had to speak up. "What are those?"

"Hey! You're not asleep!"

"Who passes out that quickly?!"

Tinasha twisted around to show him a crystal ball in her palm. "It's a magic implement. Each one contains a spell. I'm preparing these to draw up the larger spell."

"You need that many?"

"A witch cursed you. This isn't your everyday magic," she replied, lips forming a smile that seemed to be both self-deprecating and relieved.

Her long eyelashes cast shadows on her cheeks. The half of her porcelain face bathed in the moonlight from the window glowed pale, transforming her beauty into something ethereal. Before Oscar knew it, he was staring at her.

"It's already been half a year," he blurted out.

While he was no Lazar, it really did feel like the time had gone quickly.

She grinned at that. "Right on schedule, just like I said."

"And you've managed to cause no end of trouble in such a short while, too."

"Because you let me be free."

That was the truth, and she knew he was no different.

Each day they spent together was nothing like the one before. Tinasha's utterly carefree demeanor, her immense power she wielded like it was child's play... It was so novel and new that it left Oscar amazed and filled with a wondrous sense of liberty.

"You do the most unexpected things. Like sleeping underneath a castle for four centuries," he commented dryly.

"I was the one who built that underground chamber. I was only making good use of it."

Oscar recalled the sight of that verdant subterranean garden, removed from the flow of time.

The young woman sleeping on the white bed had spoken his name when she arose.

"When I first saw you—I thought you were made for me," Oscar confessed.

Because he discovered her while seeking a way to break his curse, his first thought was that this must be his bride. The curse that had always mystified him—even that made sense once he met her. He felt like maybe it had all been leading to that moment.

Calmly, she spoke into the silence of the room. "Yes. I did come for you."

It echoed what he had said, but it was not the same. Still, both encapsulated emotions that were too large to hold.

Whatever sounds there were beyond the room didn't reach Oscar. The chamber was cut off from the outside world. The flow of time was different, as if this place were submerged. Amid the quiet, everything floated to the surface.

To Oscar, it felt like he might see every corner of the room if he squinted. He closed his eyes again, however.

"Tinasha."

"What?"

"Nothing..."

He didn't know what to say, or how. There was a desire to express something, but hesitation as well.

In the end, he asked something that was almost what he wanted to ask, yet not quite. "Can you really break the curse?"

"I've come this far. Just trust me," she responded confidently. There was no trace of uncertainty in her voice. The girl who had cried in front of Oscar was gone. While that was a relief to him, he also felt loneliness in equal measure. Whether or not that was oversentimentality, he couldn't be sure.

If it was... then maybe, he ought to just say it.

This time he asked what he really wished to. "Are you really going to break it?"

There was a long silence heavy with something that hadn't been there before.

Tinasha answered in a clear voice. "I am."

It sounded like she was reading a line prepared ahead of time. Like the young woman had already convinced herself.

Oscar snorted at that resolute beauty.

She's struggled with it that much, huh? I suppose that only makes sense.

From here, she would go on to become queen. Another thing that made sense.

Oscar had posed a foolish question. He made a face, regretting his inquiry. Now that they were here, he realized for the first time that this was what he had been wavering on all along. He'd been even more shaken up over it than she was.

However, Oscar refused to falter anymore. This would put an end to it all.

"Go ahead," he urged before sinking deep into slumber. He let it carry him away.

As the king of Farsas fell into a soft dream, he had the faintest sensation of someone taking gentle hold of his hand.

※

Tinasha paused before the transportation array located deep in Farsas Castle and looked back.

No small number of people had taken breaks from their duties to see her off. She gave them all a bashful grin. Before the expression had faded, she bowed to the man who was approaching her. "I owe you a great deal."

"And I you. Sorry I never let you take it easy," he replied.

"I had fun. If there are ever any conflicts in the future, please call on me," Tinasha said. She carried nothing with her, for her effects had already been cleared from her room.

She lowered her head to the others present. Sylvia bowed in return, looking like she was about to cry. Tinasha smiled to see that, knowing that she would miss her friend, too.

Oscar gazed down at Tinasha. "I'll see you next at your coronation. It's fast approaching."

"Oh, you don't have to come if it'll inconvenience you."

"Just how heartless do you think I am?" he groused, lightly pinching her cheek.

Tinasha fought him off. Punctuating each of her words with a slap against his chest, she retorted, "I thought you hated diplomatic events like that!"

Chastened, Oscar released the young woman. "I'm going anyway. Try not to mess up."

"I've done it all once before!" she snarled, her petite shoulders squared in anger. But soon enough, her expression relaxed. One blink and her eyes glowed with affection. She scanned the assembled group, her gaze not landing on anyone in particular, until she looked up at Oscar. For a moment, her beautiful face appeared more adult, and she beamed lovingly at him.

In her gaze was clear, selfless love. The emotion was profound and boundless. Oscar felt his chest tighten.

It was fleeting, however, melting away to reveal Tinasha's usual childlike nature. "I'll be off, then. Thank you so much for everything."

With that, she turned to walk away from him. Her black locks swayed like silk. Even now, her petite frame exuded nobility and solitude.

She stepped onto the transportation array.

The teleportation magic activated, and the beautiful mage disappeared from Farsas.

Oscar closed his eyes, grinning bitterly.

Her image was burned into the inside of his eyelids, vivid and striking. It would be a long while before he could forget her.

■ 3. Returning the Promise

Last-minute appeals came rushing in one after another, and by the time Oscar could reach a stopping point, it was late in the afternoon.

He glanced at the clock and frowned. "Damn. Practice with Tinasha—"

Then he stopped, remembering that she had left Farsas. Not missing how his king's face had screwed up in a scowl, Lazar gave a wan smile. "I'm sure she's incredibly busy. Her coronation is in two days."

"She really was here until the absolute last minute..."

While she could travel back instantly via teleportation, a ruler on the cusp of coronation normally wouldn't remain abroad. She had done so out of a strong sense of duty and the goodness of her heart.

Tinasha had spent merely half a year living at the castle, but lingering traces of her scent popped up everywhere.

Oscar sighed, recalling how she'd smiled at him while clad in a short-sleeved outfit like something a child would wear. "She's an odd one, all right. Make sure everything she did and said in Farsas is noted down. I want it recorded for posterity."

"I believe Tuldarr may object to that," Lazar said, implying that her behavior had been just that bizarre and surely her homeland would prefer that the queen's eccentricities were kept quiet. In fact, nothing of note had been recorded about the queen who had reigned four centuries ago besides her status as the Witch Killer Queen and other meritorious deeds she had done.

"If she were a princess instead of a future queen, they might find her antics amusing," Oscar asserted.

"Are you sure? Let's not forget how many times she's wound up covered in blood," Lazar pointed out with a shudder. Ignoring him, Oscar rested his chin in his hands.

It really would have been better if she were just a princess.

If she were born as Prince Legis of Tuldarr's younger sister and second in line for the throne, she could have led a very different life. Then she might have married into another country. Oscar didn't know her as a princess, but he did know of her free-spirited nature.

And for that reason, he wished that she had more options, especially after she'd managed to escape from the Dark Age. He wanted her to have other paths she could choose besides a life of solitude spent under tremendous pressure.

Oscar realized he'd sunk deep into contemplation and snapped back to himself with a grimace. "Ugh, ridiculous."

How long was he going to spend thinking about someone who was gone? There was no shortage of other things to consider. From the corner of his eye, Oscar noticed that Lazar was watching him discreetly. The king waved a hand at his attendant. "I'm fine. Get back to work."

"Um, about that, Your Majesty. Several Farsas nobles have put in requests for an audience with you, and they would like to bring along their daughters... Er..."

"And they're hoping I'll pick one to be queen? That sounds annoying. Schedule them all for the same day."

"Are you sure?" Lazar asked.

Oscar detected the layered meaning in the question but kept his face blank as he responded. "The curse is broken, so I need to evaluate some prospects for queen soon. It's good timing, since I want to pick the most harmless one possible."

Now that the curse was undone, there was no need to seek out the most suitable partner possible. Things would be the same no matter who she was.

Forcing himself to switch gears, Oscar returned to his work.

Three hours later, he remembered that he had never eaten lunch.

※

Tuldarr had not had a queen in six generations, and no ruler had inherited so much as a single mystical spirit in eleven generations.

On the day of the coronation, guests were led into Tuldarr's cathedral, where they whispered about their fears regarding the unusual ceremony.

"A mystical spirit inheritance ceremony after Tuldarr's spells were only just restricted under the treaty? Can you believe it?"

"It's a part of the coronation tradition. They're not going to suddenly stop doing it."

"But no one's used the spirits in hundreds of years. Could there be some ulterior motive for making a show of them now, after so long?"

Tiered rows of seats ran the circumference of the oval cathedral, with the altar at the center.

Dressed in their finest, the seated guests gossiped freely.

"Is she even capable of receiving the spirits in the first place?"

The mystical spirits that would serve the ruler of Tuldarr upon coronation were actually high-ranking demons.

Such creatures were native to another plane of existence, and consequentially almost never appeared in the human realm. On the rare

occasions they did, they were frequently taken for gods, overwhelmingly powerful as they were. Some still had believers among more rural parts of the continent.

Tuldarr was already feared by other nations for being home to so many mages of preeminent magical power. For its ruler to command the mystical spirits after so many had failed to do so would make the country a concerning threat.

"It's nothing to worry about. Even if she does succeed in the ceremony, I can't imagine she'll be able to handle more than one, at most."

A wry smile came to Oscar's lips as he listened to a fellow attendee's optimistic opinion.

Of the twelve spirits, one, which took the form of a girl, was already under the command of the soon-to-be queen. No matter how things played out, she certainly wouldn't walk away with just one. Oscar's grin broadened as he envisioned how all of these guests would react once they witnessed that part of the coronation.

Yet at the same time, Oscar also understood that there was merit to the guests' concerns. Other nations would be wary if Tuldarr suddenly grew stronger. While the Magic Empire had never launched an invasion in its history, Druza had set a precedent several months before by attacking Farsas with a forbidden curse. That immense power wielded by a comparatively small group had easily disrupted an entire country. Those aware of that would harbor doubts about Tuldarr as well.

It was the wish of former king Calste, who had abdicated the previous day, that Tinasha be coronated and inherit the spirits. However, she would be the one to pay the price for it. Tinasha had a tendency to make rash decisions, and Oscar was afraid and curious to see how she would direct her country.

All of a sudden, a hush fell over the audience, and Oscar peered down toward the center of the cathedral hall. A plain altar sat atop a raised platform with ten steps. True to the atheistic beliefs of Tuldarr, there were no adorning statues or idols.

Legis had appeared, standing upon the dais and wearing ceremonial robes. The prince of Tuldarr surveyed the faces of the attendees before bowing to them. "Thank you all very much for taking the time to be here today. On behalf of the queen, I offer my warmest gratitude."

The simple address called Tinasha to mind.

A gentle smile on his lips, Legis continued. "The mystical spirit ceremony will constitute the coronation today. I am aware that there may be many unconventional elements, but I implore you to accept them as the will of our queen."

None said a word.

Strictly speaking, the kings and queens of Tuldarr did not inherit a throne.

The previous ruler had abdicated, and the new one was crowned the following day. A new ruler acquired the mystical spirits and nothing more. This long-standing tradition of ascension via magical power made Tuldarr's ancient ways plain for all to see.

The now former king Calste stood at the base of the steps alongside other mages. Only his son Legis stood at the top of the platform.

Legis bowed once more, then held out his hands. In apparent response, a transportation array appeared before the altar.

The first thing to come through the portal was the small ivory hand of a woman.

That hand, mystery incarnate, came to rest atop Legis's palm.

Next, the bottom edges of blue robes materialized. The shade, symbolic of the Tuldarr royal family, looked made of dye crafted from ground gemstones. It was a blue deeper than the sky and clearer than the sea, calling to mind the history that had fostered this Magic Empire.

Basking in the silence from the audience, the queen stepped slowly from the magic circle.

Her long hair flowed freely as waves of black, and over it she wore a silver-threaded veil embroidered with lines of pearls.

Her mage's robe was trimmed in deep blue and pure white; it outlined the slim and elegant curves of her body and flared out into a full ball gown. She lifted her skirt to stride forward, and the hem formed an arc with her movements.

Her eyelids were slightly downcast, but her eyes contained the depths of darkness as she gazed straight ahead. There was gravity to her beauty, lending her a magnificence that tugged at the soul.

"So that's the queen of Tuldarr."

Awestruck whispers ran through the crowd. Again, Oscar grinned wryly.

He should have been intimately familiar with her rare and exquisite beauty, as well as with her dignity as a queen. Seeing it on display exceeded all imagination, however. He, too, had been completely enthralled by her from the moment she appeared. This was her other side—the queen who would take the throne through force of magic.

Tinasha stood in front of the altar and drew a deep breath. As she did, Legis took two steps down the stairway and knelt.

The queen's long sleeves billowed as she spread her arms wide. Bells on her bracelets sang tinkling notes.

"The words of this contract are assembled from the will of the unvoiced."

Her voice rang out in sonorous incantation.

The atmosphere in the cathedral shifted. Magic began to swirl with Tinasha at the center.

"Hope is born from the depths of despair—the flow of time is irreversible, and all possible meanings give rise to awareness. A concept kept hidden makes the individual so, and it crawls to the cusp of the lineage it is bound to."

Dense power knit itself into an intricate spell. Like rings on water, it rose up and rippled out but did not disappear, interweaving to form a gigantic structure.

"I call upon the ancient contract, the chains that bind human to inhuman."

As the array rose higher around the altar, its complexity grew.

The gathered magic condensed toward the center, responding to Tinasha's own immense power. Her lilting incantation made the magic in the air even denser and thicker.

"Listen to me, o sleeping ones, our unfamiliar neighbors. Long ago was the day of the beginning, but you are eternal."

The magic converged. It was so thick that the faces of the mages, who were gathered at the base of the steps, had gone white.

Suddenly, a ray of pale light appeared at the center of the altar. The layered spell formed an intricate circle on the stone as if shaped by an invisible hand.

On the edges of the array, a tremendous light erupted from the one o'clock position. Then luminous bursts flared from the two o'clock and three o'clock positions as well. The same happened with each spot in order, except for the five o'clock point. On a shallow exhale, Tinasha spoke.

"Appear!"

Her voice was low, but it reached everyone present. It was as if it were coming from terribly far away but whispered directly in one's ear at the same time. The power in the word made the audience stiffen.

Tinasha's dark eyes flashed as she presided over the glowing circle.

"O spirits sleeping in Tuldarr by an ancient contract! My name is Tinasha As Meyer Ur Aeterna Tuldarr!"

Gasps erupted from different onlookers.

This power could forcibly alter the immovable. Her peerless magic could rewrite anything at all.

At last, the queen made her decree.

"I am your regent, and by this proclamation you are defined... Come to me!"

Light burst forth.

A white light blanketed every corner of the cathedral, but it was soon swept away by the wind.

Having shut their eyes against that blinding radiance, the attendees cautiously opened them to glance fearfully at the altar. The sight caused their jaws to drop.

"Those are..."

Where there was nothing only moments before, there were now beings standing in a circle at the center of the platform. These were Tuldarr's mystical spirits.

All twelve were present.

Each had taken a humanlike shape and was standing with complete indifference.

"Ludicrous. All twelve of them," guests muttered in utter shock.

In all of Tuldarr's long and storied history, only two rulers had wielded all twelve of the spirits alone.

One was King Otis, who had first summoned them and tied them to the founding of the nation. The other was the Witch Killer Queen.

Only a select few knew that Tinasha and that queen who had bested a witch four hundred years ago were the same person. Thus, the audience's astonishment quickly gave way to fear. Tuldarr had just gained immeasurable power. This would undoubtedly be a turning point in history.

Much like the audience, all of the spirits eyed the queen with surprise. Tinasha noticed, and her face broke into a smile for the first time since she'd appeared. In a voice only they could hear, she said, "It's been a very long time. Just wait a moment, all right?"

Taking that request as an order, all twelve stayed silent.

Tinasha subdued her grin and regarded the guests with a queen's countenance. "I am Tinasha As Meyer Ur Aeterna Tuldarr, and I have been enthroned as the forty-third ruler of this nation. I offer all of you my deepest gratitude for gathering here with us today."

None dared to so much as move. Courteous words though they were, they had come from a woman with strength enough to control the lives of everyone in the cathedral. Quite a few in the crowd wore white-faced expressions of terror.

Tinasha smiled, though it was a shallow one this time. Her eyes burned with the fierce glow of a monarch. She looked out over her spirits and said, "I order the spirits of Tuldarr."

The twelve knelt in response.

With unwavering confidence she said, "As your master, I call an end to our ancient contract. Henceforth, you are released from that which binds you to Tuldarr. You are now set free. You may do as you wish."

She said it lightly and liltingly.

Her proclamation petrified the entire hall. All were speechless.

The only ones unsurprised were Tinasha herself, Legis, and Renart, who stood with the other mages at the foot of the dais. Even the spirits couldn't hide their astonishment, save Mila.

The former king Calste, the first to snap from the shock, grew red in the face and cried, "Wh-what do you think you're doing?!"

He dashed up the steps, and Tinasha met him with a gentle expression.

Heedless of the international audience, Calste yelled, "Are you aware of what you've just done?!"

"Yes, of course I am. The Dark Age is long past. We are no longer in an era in which rulers must possess mighty power. As you can see in many of the faces around you, power that exceeds reasonable limits only begets

fear. And most importantly, Tuldarr is a capable enough nation without the spirits. You should know that best of all."

Tinasha glanced at Legis. The prince evidently understood Tinasha's intention from the look alone and came to stand next to her, ignoring the daggers his father was glaring at him.

Calste's balled-up fists trembled. "Legis! You knew about this?! How could you allow such a—"

"It only made sense, Father. Even if she inherits the spirits now, a day will certainly come when no king or queen wields them. So instead of relying on fleeting strength, we should prove that the people and technology of Tuldarr are what make this country strong."

"That's ridiculous," Calste said after a pause, but he issued no further protests.

After moving his father to one side, Legis nodded at Tinasha.

She faced the audience with a smile. "I hereby ascend the throne for one year, as the final queen of an era in which the rulers symbolized the power of their nations. After that, Prince Legis will become king and govern the country alongside a newly established parliament. This year will be the last for Tuldarr's ancient traditions, and you may also think of it as the time we need to prepare for a new departure."

The guests let out held breaths at her graceful speech. Little by little, the crowd began to buzz.

The Magic Empire, which had ever valued tradition, had proclaimed that it would move on from the ancient ways. Those who had shuddered fearfully only moments before now stared at the queen who had just taken the throne under such unbelievable circumstances.

Tinasha shrugged at the spirits. With a sardonic expression, she told them, "There you have it. We've only just been reunited, but I'd like to thank you for your service."

A spirit in the form of a young man stood up. "Little girl! Can we really do what we want?"

"Of course," Tinasha replied.

"Then I'm going to stay a spirit until you die. Our contract with Tuldarr may be over, but that doesn't mean you're not still my queen."

"Oh, really? I don't mind either way," Tinasha replied.

"Lady Tinasha, I'm going to stay, too!" added a female spirit.

"What? Then I guess I will as well. It's never boring with our queen, after all," drawled a male spirit.

"Nil, you get out of here! You're annoying!"

As the spirits began to bicker and banter, Tinasha massaged her temples with a grimace.

Legis's eyes widened as he watched. "They're very fond of you..."

"I think it's more that they enjoy pestering me..."

Recognizing that things would not calm down so long as the spirits kept chattering, Tinasha shot a beseeching glance at the one situated at the twelve o'clock position.

This was the oldest-looking spirit, sporting white hair. They gave the queen a dignified bow. "I am very grateful that you have ordered the end of our contract. However, as Karr said, our contract with Tuldarr and the fact that you are our master are separate things. Please allow us to accompany you to the end of your short human life span. We do so of our own free will."

"Well, I did tell you to act as you pleased. All right, then," she agreed.

"We shall take you at your word," responded the spirit. With that, the twelve fell silent. They bowed to her, each with different expressions on their faces, and then vanished from the cathedral.

Without the bickering, the spacious chamber fell deathly silent. Tinasha gave a self-possessed smile. Even beneath the weight of every eye in the room, she did not falter. There was no doubting she was the queen.

Just as many had predicted, but not at all in the way they had expected, her coronation heralded a turning point in history. Her utterly unique beauty and power would leave a vivid and eternal mark on the memories of the people.

Foreign and domestic attendees alike remained still as surely as if a binding spell had been placed on them. It was like time had stopped.

In the midst of them all, Oscar gazed at the young, beautiful ruler of Tuldarr in amazement.

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"She *really* did do something unconventional," Doan said as he and Oscar made their way to the great hall. Doan was attending the coronation as Oscar's guard. General Als, a few steps ahead of the other two, nodded deeply.

The other attendees had evidently not recovered from the surprising coronation yet, either. All were offering their impressions and thoughts. Some approved of Tuldarr for rejecting such preeminent power and even endorsed this revolutionary system overhaul, but others quietly criticized Tinasha's eccentricity and abrupt reforms.

Most nations were governed by monarchies. An attempt at utilizing a two-pillar system of a parliament and a royal monarch would certainly attract people's attention. Four hundred years after instating too many reforms during her first rule, the queen was still trying to blaze a new trail.

Oscar snorted at the circulating opinions. "There's no telling how her decision will be viewed in the years to come. But so long as the spirits continue to serve her, that will be enough to deter other countries. Tuldarr can establish its new system during that time."

Tinasha had always held Legis's aptitude for ruling in high regard. More than likely, she had been planning to enact this revolution for a while now,

and approving of his temperament had only emboldened her. She took the throne, even though it would be only for a year, in order to dissolve the contract with the spirits.

"At best, a ruler of Tuldarr inherits one or two spirits. Even if she has a child who claims the throne, there's no telling if they will be a greater mage than she is. Besides, it's clear from the state of the royal family that magic wanes over generations. She must have known that this was the last chance to inherit all the spirits and release them," Oscar remarked.

Doan sighed. "Because Tuldarr originally let power determine succession, it's always been a very logical country, in a way. A royal family that inherits the crown via its bloodline deviates from the true tradition."

"Surely that's a result of external influence from the moment Tuldarr opened itself to diplomatic relations. They must have had outside pressure," replied Oscar.

"The monarchy being absolute is a holdover from the age of the spirits. Tuldarr was actually founded in the hope that oppressed mages would cooperate with one another, and the members of the royal family were meant only to be the strongest representatives of the people. Queen Tinasha made her decision because things are different now. In a sense, she may have restored Tuldarr to its roots." Doan's tone was indifferent, but he asserted his opinion in an uncharacteristically firm way, perhaps because he was a mage himself.

Als listened to the conversation with interest but remained quiet.

When the three from Farsas reached the great hall, Legis was there receiving the guests. Attendees from every nation were clustered around him, pelting the poor man with questions.

The queen was conspicuously absent. Oscar found a mage who served her standing near the entrance and approached him. Upon catching sight of the king of Farsas, Renart bowed.

"Where's Tinasha?" asked Oscar.

Renart answered calmly, but in a low tone of voice. "She is arguing with King Calste, though I expect it to end soon... She should arrive once she's changed her clothes."

Calste had flown into such a rage in front of their audience. He had to be seething.

Oscar nodded, falling into thought. It was growing dark outside. The eastern windows revealed that the night sky was still bright, matching the color of Oscar's eyes. A faintly glowing crescent moon hung above all else. He gave it a little smile, then turned back to the other two. "I'm heading out for a bit. I'll be back once I've finished what I need to do. Do whatever you want while I'm gone."

"E-excuse me, Your Majesty?!" Als cried out in shock.

Doan looked like he was holding back a vexed exhale. Normally, he never wanted to get involved in any disputes, but this time he wore a knowing look as he asked the king, "Are you sure about this?"

"I'm not the only one. The other countries will be making their moves soon, too. Best to be quick about it."

"Your Majesty?" Als said again. He was the only one who didn't understand. Oscar clapped him on the shoulder, then moved against the flow of guests to leave.

Having escaped the crowded hall, Oscar gazed out a window at the castle's other buildings. True to a Tuldarr structure, magical protective barriers were positioned here and there around the blue and white edifices; Oscar could sense them. A thin sheen of water cascaded from an azure stone shelf jutting out into midair and splashed down into the moat of the hanging gardens.

Not many soldiers stood guard. Sentinels were patrolling around, but magic formed the crux of the palace's defense. Oscar glanced down at the sword belted at his waist and grinned. "Glad they didn't confiscate this."

The royal sword of Akashia could neutralize any magic, making it the natural enemy of mages and Tuldarr's greatest nuisance. But as it was a national treasure of Farsas and a part of the king's formal dress, it could not be confiscated without reason.

And in a nation of spells and enchantments, it was as good as a master key for Oscar. He slipped into a random deserted passageway, opened the window, and went out into the courtyard. As he made his way across the carefully manicured grass, he glanced up at a particularly tall building in the center.

"There it is."

The spray of water falling from the stone shelf glittered in the setting sun.

The blossoms in the gardens were all varieties not found in Farsas. Azure flowers shaped like round lanterns glowed faintly from the inside, and the way they swayed brought to mind the first page of a picture book.

It was like the palace of a magical kingdom from a fairy tale. And the one who would govern this castle was a woman from four hundred years ago.

A queen for only a single year.

Tinasha must have discussed it with Legis and other advisers on countless occasions. While Tuldarr's parliamentary system was not without historical precedent, no other nation utilized that system. Establishing one now was sure to be an uphill battle.

Still, she had chosen this fight. This method of governance—monarch and citizens supporting one another, with no room for self-righteousness—was likely an ideal she'd held on to since the Dark Age, when power was crucial to survival.

The gardens that streamed between the buildings sloped upward so gradually that the incline was almost unnoticeable. Oscar came to the base of a spire that adjoined the tall building, and he gazed up at the white stone walls. "All right, let's go."

"Where are you headed?" inquired an amused-sounding feminine voice from overhead. Oscar looked up to see a red-haired girl floating down, hugging her knees. It was Mila, one of the spirits who served Tinasha.

Oscar replied, "I need to talk to her. Are the regent's chambers just above here?"

"Yes, but you'll see her later in the great hall if you just wait."

"That'll be too late, and I don't want anyone else to overhear us. Can you stop her?"

In all likelihood, Mila had appeared to protect her master. Conscious of Akashia, Oscar met Mila's gaze and waited to see if she would chase him away.

The redhead grinned. "You can do what you want, but I'm not going to help you."

"That's fine, provided that you don't obstruct me, either," Oscar answered, placing a hand on the wall.

Mila's eyes grew wide. "You're going to *climb*?"

"The guards will stop me if I go inside."

"Seriously? Do you have a death wish? Look, I'll do you a favor and put an illusion on you, so the snipers don't shoot you and send you plummeting to your demise."

"That would actually help a ton, thanks," Oscar said.

Mila shook her head and sighed in disbelief. She disappeared with a snap of her fingers, and Oscar placed his hand on the wall once more. He began to climb up, his eyes on a tiny transom window.

He wouldn't think about how he wished Tinasha had only told him she planned to be queen for just a year. He knew it was a matter of national politics. She couldn't reveal her plan to someone from another country. If their positions were reversed, he wouldn't consider telling her, either.

So it wasn't too late. Now was the soonest he could do this.

Oscar came out onto a small corridor and grabbed hold of the wall of *another* adjoining building.

He passed several magical barriers on his climb to the highest floor, but Akashia nullified all of them.

The window of her room was not locked and was protected only by a barrier. Oscar took out the royal sword and looked around the dark room that was occupied by only a few pieces of furniture.

"Did we pass right by each other?"

Night had fallen entirely by now. Oscar had climbed via the shortest path, but could Tinasha have already changed clothes and headed for the great hall? Unsure whether he should trespass further after already breaking in, Oscar sank into a chair by the windowsill. Then he remembered his dragon.

"Nark."

In answer to his summons, a red dragon the size of a hawk appeared and perched on his shoulder. Oscar was about to order it to see if Tinasha was in the great hall when a door in the back of the room opened.

Light spilled into the dark chamber. Heedless of the other occupant, the girl who entered headed for a door opposite the one she'd come through.

Then, out of the blue, her left hand sliced through the air. Instantaneously, orbs of magic launched in Oscar's direction.

Before he could say a word, he had Akashia up and its blade out against the attack.

The magic orbs struck the sword and were dispelled. The girl turned to look, and her eyes widened with realization. "A-again?!"

"What do you mean 'again'?"

"Never mind." Tinasha sighed, deflated. Clad in the same outfit from her coronation, she must have just come from her debate with Calste. It was very like her to attack with magic before checking to see who was there, and Oscar had been expecting it. That was why he had waited with Akashia drawn.

Tinasha stared at him. "How did you get in?"

"The window. I must be growing comfortable with your barriers because I entered pretty easily. You're so careless."

"Not many people are capable of breaking my barrier," Tinasha said, obviously cross. This was the same person who'd been in the cathedral, but her aura was different. Things were the same between them as they had always been—a mood of closeness and openness. It comforted Oscar.

Resting an elbow on the chair and his chin in one hand, he gazed at Tinasha. "You really went for it back there, huh?"

"Well... my mind was made up for a while."

"Calste looked livid."

"He was about to pop several blood vessels," Tinasha admitted with a laugh, heading for the far door again. There was a closet there, and she emerged soon enough wearing a simple version of a queen's formal dress.

"Anyway, I'd like to get changed..."

"Ah, sorry. I need to talk to you, and it will only take a minute."

This was why he had come. He was visiting her room to speak to her not as royals, but as individuals.

Still clutching the new outfit to her chest, Tinasha cocked her head. "Talk to me about what?"

"What are you going to do once you abdicate?"

"I—I'm not quite sure... I suppose marrying Legis would be the right thing to do? That should satisfy Calste a little as well," she replied in a way that almost suggested she wasn't connected to the matter. Oscar had expected an answer like that. She would exit the center stage, make a marriage of convenience, and ensure that her blood remained in Tuldarr. That was indeed the safest choice. But there had to be other options available.

Oscar had begun to scowl unconsciously. Upon realizing it, he straightened out his face and said lightly, "Why not come with me?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why don't you marry me?"

This was why he'd climbed the tower.

While it was indeed blunt as proposals went, Tinasha couldn't immediately comprehend it. She stayed frozen for a bit; something Oscar had anticipated. After deliberating over how to make this easier to swallow, he elected to begin with the part Tinasha was probably most anxious about.

"It's not a bad idea at all. If you're going to change the system, an alliance with another country will give greater security, and it will relax other nations more than if you marry Legis. Some people are going to see you as a threat no matter what you do, but no one will want to challenge both Tuldarr and Farsas at once."

"What? I—I mean, that's true, but something seems... Um, give me a moment," Tinasha trailed off, shaking her head at the neatly wrapped facts he had presented her with.

Undoubtedly, other nations were thinking the very same thing.

If Tinasha planned to abdicate, then they could lure them and forge a bond with Tuldarr. Not only that, but Tinasha had demonstrated her own strength at the coronation. She would be an immediate asset to any power on the continent. While a threat in Tuldarr, she could also make a powerful ally.

However, Farsas was the only country that would be able to safeguard Tinasha's homeland in return.

After Oscar's declaration, Tinasha's expression changed from confused to serious and pensive. It was the face of a queen evaluating the political merits of what she had been offered.

She was well within her rights to do so, but it clashed with Oscar's intentions. He flashed a strained smile at this deeply earnest queen. "Sorry. The way I phrased that was a little unfair. Let me say it again."

He recalled the day they met.

She had been asleep under the palace for four hundred years, all to meet him.

Oscar had thought of her as childlike. A ridiculous person who couldn't fit a mold if she tried. In his wildest dreams, he could never have anticipated any of the stunts she pulled.

However, he could envision a future with her.

Walking hand in hand and growing old together—he could see that life with her.

His offer was born of personal feelings.

Oscar gazed right into her dark eyes. "I want you. So I'm asking you to marry me. That's all it is."

He had no other reason, and he didn't care to think of one.

His feelings were so simple; Oscar could almost laugh at himself.

Tinasha's eyes grew round as saucers. "... *Excuse* me?"

"I'm not sure how I feel about that response," he said, a little offended by her shock but also enjoying needling her about it.

Oscar headed for the window to leave the same way he came. Tinasha was still rooted to the ground, and he turned back to look at her. "Well, you have a year, so think it over."

"H-hold on just a minute. Why are you going out the window...? Wait, that's not the point!" she cried, burying her face in her hands.

Then she managed to find the words and popped her face back out. "I thought you weren't interested in me?" She sounded like a little girl who knew nothing at all.

One hand already set to climb down, Oscar paused and replied, "I couldn't disrupt my country because I had personal feelings for someone. I did my best not to get attached. But if you're going to abdicate, that changes everything."

The moment Tinasha had announced she would relinquish the throne in a year, something like shock had run through Oscar.

Once she wasn't a queen, he could pursue her without issue. Marrying her would be a boon. However, more than any sort of diplomatic calculation, he simply wanted to be close to her.

Tinasha's childlike happiness and anger, the defenseless way she carried herself, the way she was farsighted, coolheaded, and bold. She was a hard worker, stubborn, and never ashamed of herself. Everything about her was inconsistent and odd. How could Oscar not have felt captivated?

And when he learned of the deep loneliness she carried, he wanted to rid her of it.

Oscar wanted to make a place for her at his side, yet he'd never been able to.

Tinasha was a rare find.

Irreplaceable.

If only he could take her hand in his, if only he didn't have to let her go...

"I want to be with you. I don't want to let anyone else have you. If you desire me, I'm yours," he said fervently, roguishly. Tinasha shivered violently. Evidently, she hadn't fully processed such a sudden change. Oscar shrugged. "That's all I came to say. You're in a hurry, aren't you? Sorry about that. I'll go say good-bye to Legis and head home. See you."

With that, he leaped out the window. As the garden below rushed up to meet him, he called, "Nark!"

In response to its master's order, the scarlet dragon rapidly grew to the size of a small house and caught its master on its back. Nark made a leisurely turn in the air, and Oscar laughed out loud.

After sheathing the royal sword, he asked the dragon, "How did things turn out in that future you've seen? Did she marry me?"

Nark let out a shrill cry and dived for the gardens. In the night sky, the moon shone with an azure glow.

Als and Doan breathed great sighs of relief when their king returned an hour after he'd left.

While Oscar hadn't done anything too bold lately, this was a king with a natural propensity for recklessness. Both men were filled with trepidation whenever he was left to himself.

When he showed up again, he was in a strangely good mood. They wanted to ask where he had been, but they had a pretty good idea. All Oscar said was, "I'm going to go say good-bye, and then we'll go," so they held their tongues and gave up on questioning him.

The reception went on without the queen. Legis, still inundated by guests, caught sight of the king of Farsas heading for him, and his eyes widened slightly. He'd been wondering the entire time where one of Tuldarr's guests of honor had been.

Legis strode up to Oscar and bowed to him. Formal words of greeting were exchanged.

Once the social niceties were complete, Legis kept his pleasant smile as he made a pointed remark. "I'm afraid I haven't seen you in the hall for quite some time."

"Mm-hmm... I had something to discuss with Tinasha. I left to go see her," Oscar answered.

Legis gasped. Once the surprise faded from his face, he seemed a little bitter.

After Tinasha's announcement that she would abdicate in a year, he had wondered if something like this might occur. Even if she had remained queen, it might still have happened anyway.

What had they discussed? And how had she answered? Legis could hazard a fair guess. He understood the situation as well as they did—better, perhaps, as an outside observer. For a moment, a flash of loneliness passed through his eyes, and he closed them.

When he looked up at Oscar again, his gaze was direct. "She is the treasure of our Tuldarr. Will you give what she's worth?"

"Of course, if that's what she wants."

Legis's judgment stemmed from the coolheadedness of someone who would rule over the country. He didn't allow so much as an ounce of his personal feelings to factor into it. He could already see marriage with Farsas as a way to uphold a peaceful reign.

Oscar respected the other man's sensibility. He thought of the woman at the center of it all.

All that's left now is to wait for her answer.

The six months since he'd met her had passed quickly. So, too, would the year to come, surely.

Oscar wasn't in any hurry.

Compared to four hundred years, this would be but the blink of an eye.

4. The Crystal Orb's Enchanted Sleep

With a clear tinkle, the teacups shattered.

"Oh no... I broke them," Tinasha groaned.

The mystical spirit seated across the table from her made a disappointed face as she regarded the broken pieces. By appearances alone, she was a beautiful woman in her midtwenties with long green hair pulled into a ponytail.

Casting an appalled look at her master, she said, "You should train yourself in detaching your magic from your emotions, Lady Tinasha."

"I did, a long time ago... I know how to do it," Tinasha replied, sighing.

"It doesn't seem that way."

"I know..."

Regardless of any excuse, Tinasha had broken the teacups.

Before she could clean everything up, the shattered cups and the spilled tea vanished. The spirit must have disposed of them.

Tinasha thanked her before donning some sealing ornaments. "I shouldn't have carried breakable items. Next time, I'll use metal cups."

"Will that really solve the problem? Why not deal with the source? Maybe you can get rid of him."

"I won't do that!"

Tinasha had been acting like this whenever she was free since her coronation the week before. Naturally, the trigger had been Oscar's proposal, a total bolt from the blue that had thrown her emotions into complete turmoil.

With a very human mannerism, the spirit threw her master a sidelong glance. "I don't know why you're so indecisive. You came here to see him in the first place, didn't you?"

"Yes, but... But things haven't been like that this whole time! He's always been so mean to me! All he does is scold me!"

"I wasn't around, so I wouldn't know," the spirit replied crisply.

Tinasha flopped onto the table. Excluding Mila, the lone spirit who had served Tinasha, the twelve mystical spirits had been inactive for the past four centuries. Raking a hand through her hair, Tinasha gazed up at the spirit. "How would you answer him, Lilia?"

"I would say no. It sounds like a lot of trouble."

"..."

Consulting one of the spirits had been a mistake. Face still planted on the table, Tinasha let out a groan. "Me, marry *him*? No way... no way at all."

She remembered what he'd said to her when she was much younger.

"You will reach me, and you'll be happy."

The Oscar who'd disappeared had promised her that. The present Oscar was the same man, but still very different.

For the past six months, she hadn't so much as dreamed of a future with him.

Still, the current Oscar knew why she'd come from four hundred years in the past. There was no way he hadn't picked up on it. And yet he'd told her, *"Don't let it weigh you down anymore."*

And that was enough. Tinasha had been so happy that she could have died right then; she'd truly felt that it was worth it to come to this era.

"But marrying him..."

Tinasha bit back a sigh. She had never put words to her feelings for Oscar. For the longest time, she'd avoided thinking about that.

There was one thing on which Tinasha was certain. She'd discovered it after awakening in this era and spending time with him. Even if their paths diverged, he was someone very dear to her.

It was clear that he was important, but beyond that... she didn't know.

It had never required much thought until now. How was she supposed to respond now that it was at the forefront of decisions she had to make? Oscar had apparently mentioned the proposal to Legis and some others, who had wished her well with Farsas. Meanwhile, her attendant Renart and the spirits couldn't understand her hesitation.

Had Oscar proposed for purely political reasons, Tinasha would have given an answer sooner. But that didn't seem to be the case. Just pondering it made her feel dizzy, so much so that she was grateful for the times when she was buried in work.

Lilia eyed her agonized master and remarked coolly, "Just marry him if he wants you."

"I don't know why he's proposed to me, though. Even supposing that on some wild chance he really does like me and it's not some trick of my imagination, we're in a different time now... He doesn't know what people were like in the Dark Age."

When she first awoke in this time, Tinasha had harbored a faint hope that he might fall in love with her, buoyed up by the fact that they'd been married in their previous history together. But once she'd snapped out of

that daydream, she realized that she was only a queen with a bloodstained past.

People only saw one side of Tinasha—a person who'd escaped her own time period and abandoned the throne to live freely for a short while. If Oscar knew how she'd subjugated those around her in the past, he definitely wouldn't feel the same way about her.

Lilia, one of Tinasha's servants since the Dark Age, sipped from her teacup. "That's true. In those days, you were the type to betray someone in order to stand on your own two feet."

"Do you really think I was that bad?! I mean, that *is* how it was, but still!"

"That's why I suspect the Akashia swordsman might also be planning to betray you."

"And get a Tuldarr hostage! That *would* make his motives easier to understand, but—"

"So should we get rid of him after all?" Lilia asked.

"No!" Tinasha shouted, leaping to her feet.

As Lilia watched her master go brew a new pot of tea, she giggled. "You know, I'm very glad to find you enjoying yourself. When you told us you wanted to put yourself in a magic sleep, I thought you'd finally gone crazy."

"I can't believe how much you didn't trust me!" the queen exclaimed, pouting.

Shortly after abdicating, Tinasha had informed the twelve spirits that she planned to enter a magic sleep. They were unanimously opposed to that idea and told her it was ridiculous because they knew it was for Oscar, and they doubted his claim about traveling backward through time. However, a closer examination had revealed that the orb responsible was a very real power that existed outside all laws.

Tinasha decided to ask Lilia about something she'd been contemplating earlier. "Do you know how time travel is possible? It goes against the laws of magic."

"I don't know. It may be that it looks like time travel, but it's actually something else," the green-haired spirit responded.

"Like dismantling the world and reconstructing it based on records? I hadn't thought of that, but I can't get past the immense scale. A tiny orb couldn't contain all that."

"Then perhaps it's simply that another law that makes such a thing possible has been brought in," Lilia said.

"Brought in? From where?"

They were meant to be just chatting and tossing around ideas. But Lilia's suggestion sent an involuntary jolt through Tinasha, and her hands stilled.

The spirit went on. "It's human foolishness to assume that you understand everything. We demons live on a different plane of existence, and even we can't perceive that many other realms. So wouldn't it make

sense that from time to time, someone with unusual powers would be born somewhere or a mysterious phenomenon would occur?"

"I suppose... that's true," Tinasha replied slowly.

It was extremely rare for someone to be born with strange powers that were not magic. Those abilities generally entailed postcognition and precognition, but where such skills originated from was unknown. Ancient myths would call powers of this nature blessings from the gods. The research of many mages confirmed that these abilities were distinct from magic.

As Tinasha poured tea, she sighed. "Now that you mention it, strange things like that did happen in my past reign... Remember the Harvesting?"

"At those odd old ruins? We never did find out what sort of mechanism was behind that."

"When it happened, I was more concerned with ending it than with uncovering the cause, but now that I'm thinking about it again, it really was weird."

The queen recalled an inexplicable incident that had claimed the lives of hundreds. A culprit had never been found, nor could anyone hazard a guess as to why they'd done it. Compared to that, going back in time almost felt easier to comprehend. She didn't know how the magic orb operated, but it was clear that whoever used it wanted to alter the past.

Feeling stupefied, Tinasha sipped at her tea. Just then, there was a knock on the door and Legis entered. "Excuse me, Your Majesty, but I have a number of reports to make."

"Confidential ones, I assume. What are they?" said Tinasha, correctly guessing why Legis had come to her chamber, while she was at rest, and not to the queen's study.

Legis gave a weak smile at how perceptive his queen was. "First of all, several private requests for marriage talks have come in."

"Again?"

"You are an object of mass destruction, and many hope that will pass to your progeny," Lilia offered. "Anyone who can draw you over to their country will kill two birds with one stone."

"Thank you for that brutally honest reminder," Tinasha replied tartly.

For a moment, Legis looked with dread at this spirit who spoke in such an unreserved manner to her master. However, Tinasha didn't mind it at all, instead pouring a cup of tea for Legis. "And the rest of the report?"

"A rebellion against the parliamentary system is mounting. We don't have solid leads, but some nasty individuals are plotting the use of force."

"To assassinate me, you mean? They're welcome to try anytime they like," the queen responded calmly. She had overwhelming power and confidence on her side. In her eyes was the strength of someone well accustomed to fighting for her life, and she didn't seem perturbed in the least.

While Tinasha partook of her tea, Lilia frowned. "Four hundred years have passed, and you're still surrounded by enemies?"

"Such is the fate of someone who tries to do something different. It makes perfect sense."

"Then why don't you sentence them all to death?" Lilia suggested blithely.

Legis, who was in the process of sitting down at the table, boggled at that. He shot a questioning glance at Tinasha, who only smiled with her hands wrapped around her teacup.

"I told you, Lilia, times are different now. First, we should talk to them and try winning them over. *Then* we can resort to force, if necessary. If all they're doing is calling me a little girl with nothing but magic to her name, they'll be easily dealt with... and we can get rid of them anytime." The queen gave a brilliant smile. For a moment, however, something as icy as a river in the night flashed in her eyes, and Legis didn't miss it.

Noticing that he was still frozen in place and hadn't sat down yet, Tinasha faced him. "What's wrong?"

"Ah... I'm sorry," he answered, planting himself on the chair. Tinasha put a teacup in front of him. That she brewed and served on her own, actions quite unlike a queen's, spoke to both her friendliness and her vigilance against poisoning. Over the past two to three months of talks about changing the system in Tuldarr, Legis had caught glimpses of such shrewdness from her. He had to imagine it was typical of one from the Dark Age.

Legis felt like he might pass out if the conversation continued in this vein, so he switched topics. "Ah yes, what are you going to do about the proposal from Farsas? If you're going to accept, then we can reject all the other ones."

"Aaaahhhh... just when I'd managed to forget..."

"If you can forget about him so easily, perhaps you should say no?" Lilia suggested.

"N-not so fast," Tinasha protested.

"Why don't you just go and see him? That should give you your answer much faster than dawdling around here," Lilia countered.

"Dawdling..."

Tinasha deflated at having it put so succinctly. But soon enough, she stopped massaging her temples in frustration and looked up. "Ah, shall we get back to work?"

"As you wish."

"Very well."

The queen clapped her hands, and the three of them vanished from the room. It was just a few moments past noon.

While it was afternoon, it was dim inside the room, owing to the thick cloths pinned up over the windows.

A girl was sitting on a chair in one corner of the chamber, away from the sliver of a sunbeam that managed to poke through. Her eyes were shut, but she wasn't asleep. She simply liked things this way.

Her awareness reached to every corner of this enclosed space, and when she sensed someone approaching from the hallway, she looked up. Stretching out a hand, she drew up a spell. Magic requiring no incantation made the door silently swing inward.

The young man on the other side peered into the room and chuckled. "All closed off again... Your body needs a little sunlight every so often."

"I don't like it."

"You're hopeless," Valt said as he strode into the room and walked up to her. He stroked Miralys's glossy silver hair, and she smiled.

"The witch took the throne. Is that all right?"

"Yes. I needed her to."

"How's Farsas?"

"That's also fine for the time being. Akashia remains a bit of a wild card, though," Valt answered as he pulled over a chair and sat across from Miralys. He crossed his legs and rested his chin in an arm he set on his knee. In his light brown eyes was a hint of a shadow.

"It doesn't matter that the king of Farsas fell for her. We only have to split them up and get her alone. She's the weaker one."

"Really?" asked Miralys.

"Psychologically, and that's what matters."

Force of will was paramount. They knew that there were times when it could outsmart even the most powerful and change history.

The girl sighed, eyeing the five rings on her right hand. "I'm still praying that I don't have to face off against her directly. I may be borrowing your magic, but I'm still no match for a witch."

"I'm working to ensure that doesn't happen. Even though history was overwritten on a vast scale, plenty of people are still the same as they were. I have lots of pawns I can move around."

Seeing the future. Orchestrating fate. Those were their weapons.

Valt smiled reassuringly at Miralys... but the expression faded swiftly.

"The world is waiting for one last straw."

"What?"

"It's something my father said. The world is trying to converge on the future that's closest to how things should have been. Humans continue to alter it because of their desires. It's a cycle. And so the world is waiting for one last straw—a final move to restore things to their original form."

"That sounds like something from a dream."

"The next day, my father hanged himself for the first time, and I understood everything," Valt said as lightly as if he were discussing what he'd eaten for dinner yesterday, but his words painted a sorrowful picture.

They cast a shadow as dark as the ones the fierce midday sun peeking through the curtain left on the floor.

Miralys frowned. "Valt?"

"I understood. And yet I—"

Silence.

It was like that dark room rejected and blocked off every fate in the world. Amid a sense of ennui almost inherited from the futures trying to converge, a drab melancholy shrouded the chamber.

Miralys stood, reached out for Valt, and clasped his face between her hands. She leaned close to him and whispered, "I don't want to let you die."

"I'll be fine." The man smiled, yet despite his cheerful expression, he gave off a gloomy vibe, as if he'd accepted his fate.

※

It was just about lunchtime, and Oscar was puzzled that Royal Chief Mage Kumu, Doan, and Als had turned up at the door to his study.

They stood in a row before his desk, docile looks on their faces. Finding that unsettling, Oscar came right out with it. "What? What happened?"

"To be frank, we have a report to make to you, sire," said Kumu, stepping forward and passing the king three documents.

Oscar began to scan them, and once he had finished reading everything, the expression on his face was quite indescribable. "What's going on here? Magic?"

"More than likely."

According to the papers, ruins had been uncovered the month before in the mountains of southwest Farsas. Local villagers had happened upon a cliff eroded by recent heavy rains while foraging in the woods. Beneath the cliff resided a cave that appeared to be man-made. They had reported this to the castle.

The mages who led the investigation of the site had judged the ruins to be centuries old based on the shape of the entrance passageway. However, no Farsas records described anything like it in that location, leaving the structure unidentifiable.

Upon returning to the castle and getting equipment in order, the mages formed a survey team and returned to examine the cavern more thoroughly.

Oscar *did* recall granting permission for that soon after arriving home from Tinasha's coronation. And now he was holding the results from that investigation in his hands.

When he read that none had returned, he scowled with displeasure. "This is extremely serious. It's hard to believe five court mages have vanished."

"Unfortunately, it's the truth," replied Kumu.

But the problems didn't end there. In one night, all the residents of the village near the ruins disappeared. Kumu added, "One mage in the party

arrived late. He's the one who discovered the fate of the other five. Upon realizing the rest of the group was gone, he inquired at the village if any had seen them. However, all the locals had vanished as well, so he returned to the castle."

"Does that mean they went into the ruins and couldn't come out? How far did that mage search for the others?"

"He only looked around the entrance, where he was supposed to meet them. When they weren't there, he checked at the village first. It was probably wise that he didn't venture deeper."

If he had, he might have vanished with the rest, and the issue would not have come to light until much later.

Oscar puzzled over this account that made less sense by the moment. "If they went missing after entering the ruins, does that mean all the villagers went inside, too?"

"That can't be... They were forbidden from doing so, as it was a royal investigation, so I would find it hard to imagine they'd all get close," Kumu replied. Then his face visibly darkened. "However, there *was* an anti-decay charm at the entrance. But its spell composition was unique."

"Unique how?"

"Much of it was impossible to decipher, suggesting the utilization of technology outside our magical knowledge... It's possible there's something very strange inside there."

Oscar leaned back in his chair. He crossed his legs over the top of his desk, rakishly. Brooding, he inquired, "Do you think we should bring Akashia?"

All three had expected him to say that, and they didn't respond initially. After a short pause, Kumu spoke falteringly. "I don't believe that you should be there, Your Majesty. We don't know what we'd be walking into. It's terrible what happened to the people who were lost, but we think we should seal off the entire site..."

"So you're suggesting we cut our losses?"

These three members of Oscar's inner circle had likely wanted to keep this from him. Akashia was the best tool in all of Farsas for dealing with unknown spells.

When Oscar was still crown prince, he had actually traveled on foot with Lazar to a sealed-off magical ruin.

However, bringing Akashia to this mysterious situation would mean exposing the king to danger. The person most suited for the job was also the one they absolutely couldn't afford to lose.

Utterly stuck and possessing no good ideas, the three had decided this was not something to conceal from their liege and wound up delivering the news to him. They all held their breath as they awaited Oscar's judgment.

After closing his eyes and thinking, Oscar abruptly swung his legs off the desk and got to his feet. "So it's either living up to expectations or going against them? I don't really care either way, but... I'll go."

Kumu, Doan, and Als restrained themselves from expressing aloud that they knew he'd say that.

They'd anticipated this from the start. Oscar's personality was such that there was no way he'd approve of sealing off the ruins. In fact, that would actively bother him.

Oscar had an inkling about his subordinates' feelings but ignored them as he issued orders quite naturally. "We should go quick. Be ready to explore the site tomorrow."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The three men bowed and left the study.

In the hall, they exchanged looks and sighed.

※

As the report had indicated, the entrance to the ruins really did look like it had originally been buried inside a cliff.

The entryway under the cliff was supported by gigantic stones, the surfaces of which had traces of mud. Someone had probably plastered over the ruins with rocks and wet dirt. Chance had exposed it, and now many people were missing.

"If we're going to seal it off anyway, I'd like to record why we elected to do so," Oscar muttered as he gazed up at the entrance, washed clean by the rain.

The party had teleported there and were checking over their equipment one more time before going inside. No one except the king spoke, for they were all too nervous.

Oscar called Doan and General Granfort to his side and issued some simple instructions. On this expedition, they were in charge of the mages and the officers, respectively.

Ordinarily, Als would be present, but since Oscar had left the castle, Als had remained there instead. Too many people in the search party would limit maneuverability, so it totaled only thirteen members.

"Should something happen, retreat. Protect yourself first and foremost."

All nodded in assent to that, though it was coming from a king who did not tend to prioritize protecting himself.

Chief Mage Kumu remained at the entrance. His role would be to communicate with Doan—who was heading inside—and relay any findings back to the castle. Oscar scanned the faces of his team, who were all ready, and nodded. "Then here we go."

With that unceremonious start, Oscar led the way into the cave. The little dragon on his shoulders yawned.

Doan hurried after him with a glowing ball of magic light. "This is too clean for a ruin from hundreds of years ago. It may very well be true that some unknown technology is at work."

"There's no seams on these walls at all," remarked Oscar. The surfaces above, below, and on their sides were smooth, obviously cut by human hands. However, the high level of magic evident in such design far exceeded the norm for the time period the structure would've come from.

Oscar rapped on a wall. "Time hasn't worn at them at all, just like Tinasha."

"I beg of you never to say that to her, Your Majesty."

"You know, she actually studied pretty hard even after coming to Farsas."

The queen of the Magic Empire had worked hard to make up for her four-hundred-year gap, and now enjoyed a place as the most preeminent mage of the era. Perhaps she could've told them what this strange place was?

The group proceeded carefully down the passage, which was reminiscent of the underground labyrinth beneath Farsas Castle.

No traps seemed to be laid, which made the straight, even route all the more monotonous. After walking for fifteen minutes, Oscar turned back to Doan with a frown and asked, "Was the mountain this big? We've gone pretty far back."

"It's quite strange... Judging by the distance, we should soon reach the other side and exit to the open air. Yet..."

They had come in via a cavern in the side of a mountain, which itself wasn't all that large. Surely, they'd reach the opposite end before long if they continued. However, the path before them appeared as lengthy as when they'd set out, the end of it dark. Oscar and Doan both grew uneasy.

Several minutes later, a shout changed everything.

"Your Majesty!" came a sharp call from the back of the party. Oscar and Doan whirled around instantly.

"What happened?!" Oscar demanded, seized with apprehension. Granfort should have been at the very rear of the group, but he was not the one to reply.

A soldier gulped and then answered tremulously, "The general... vanished."

"He *what*?"

After a beat, the whole party turned to look back. No matter how they strained their eyes, they couldn't spot the general.

"Hardly any time, and we've lost another person," Oscar whispered sourly, scratching at his temple. He couldn't sense anything, and neither could Doan, who was alert for any magic in the air.

Granfort wasn't the only one to vanish, either. The soldier and two mages just ahead of him had vanished as well. It was someone in front of them who'd happened to turn back and realize what was wrong.

The whole group stopped there to examine the walls and floor but could find nothing out of the ordinary. Doan contacted Kumu, then once he was

done, he looked up at his king with a grave expression. "Your Majesty, let's head back. This is too dangerous."

"Hmm."

"If you must conduct a search, we should request aid from Tuldarr. None of our mages have any idea what happened."

"You do have a point," Oscar admitted. Doan was suggesting they ask Tinasha for help. Royal sword in hand, Oscar considered his options.

He'd expected something like this to happen, but it was more bizarre than he'd imagined. If they kept going, they were liable to lose the entire party.

"I guess we'll go back," the king said to himself, coming to a decision after some deliberation. Just as he opened his mouth to issue the order, he detected something strange.

Oscar glanced at the ground and noticed it shimmering a hazy white. Faintly, he could make out a spell composition there.

"Fall back!" he cried, grabbing Doan and leaping farther down the path.

It was too sudden for the others to react, however, and they winked out of sight, stunned looks on their faces.

Oscar clicked his tongue in frustration. Doan tugged on his sleeve. "Y-Your Majesty!"

Oscar turned to look deeper into the passage and was struck speechless to see the path ahead glowing.

What's more, the light was coming toward them, expanding outward bit by bit. The king glanced over his shoulder and understood that the light that had swallowed up the soldiers behind was also creeping closer.

The trap was closing in from both sides, making it impossible to escape.

In the end, the glow filled the entire passageway and caught the last two.

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When he came to, Oscar was in a rock chamber he'd never seen before.

He hadn't lost consciousness, but his memories were disconnected. At some point, he'd found himself standing in this small room. He could remember being on the path with Doan up until moments before, but now he was alone.

"What is this place?"

The rock chamber wasn't very big. He could walk the length of one of its sides in ten paces. There was no furniture, and swords and magic implements were scattered across the floor like so much trash.

"Damn it... Did we all get separated?" Oscar whispered, checking to make sure he had Akashia in his right hand and Nark on his shoulder. Noticing its master's gaze, the dragon cocked its head. Oscar petted it as he scanned the room.

There was a single door. Judging there to be nothing else of importance around, Oscar opened it and went out. The first priority was locating the rest of the investigation team. He prayed they were all safe.

"I suppose it's been a while since I explored some ruins on my own," Oscar mused with no small degree of pride, recalling the days of his youth when all he did was sneak out of the castle. The door led to the same type of passageway the party had been on before they'd disappeared, although likely a different one.

Oscar had changed locations so suddenly that he couldn't be sure of where he was, but one thing he did know was that this structure had to be vast. The path was plainly constructed and yet plenty bright, despite no sign of a light source. Doors similar to the one Oscar had come through lined the sides, each a few dozen paces apart. His door was situated at the end of the corridor.

"I guess it saves me the trouble of choosing left or right," Oscar remarked as he set off. He didn't sense any sort of mechanisms, but there was no room to get careless. While making his way toward another door, he remained vigilant against any traps.

"All right—"

Before Oscar had time to wonder what was beyond the door, he detected something abnormal and leaped back. No sooner had he done so than a white blade sped past where he'd been standing.

A moment later, an expressionless assailant was standing before him. The young man clad in black wore light equipment and gripped a dagger in each hand. Everyone knew that those who wielded twin blades were descendants of an assassin clan.

Taking a deep breath, Oscar readied Akashia. "Nark, get back."

Obeying its master's order, the dragon flew up to the ceiling. The assailant struck without giving Oscar so much as a moment. Crouching low, he closed the distance between them with frightening speed.

Oscar used Akashia to repel the left dagger, which had been aimed at his legs. He instantly pulled Akashia back and up to parry the right, which had been lancing for his chest.

The motions all occurred within the span of a second. Assassins were known for their inhumanly honed speed.

Yet Oscar was swifter.

Without waiting for the man to stab at him again, Oscar kicked up at his torso. The assassin jumped back to minimize the blow, however. He was more talented than the average military officer, and Oscar smirked despite himself. Caustically, he inquired, "You're tougher than I thought. Are you the guardian of this place or something?"

His opponent didn't respond—instead readying their weapons. Oscar had wanted to gather a little information, but his opponent didn't seem to feel like talking.

I can't waste too much time. I still don't know what happened to my people.

Oscar switched modes. When the assassin leaped for him, he moved right in for him, too. This threw off his assailant, delaying his reaction.

That spelled the end of the fight. With no groaning or grimacing in pain, the black-clad man disappeared once his belly was ripped open. It was like he was never anything but a phantom.

Astonished, Oscar looked all around. He'd felt the stab through his sword, but no one was there. There were no traces of blood on Akashia's blade, either.

"What in the world was that?" Oscar said, shaking his head.

He opened the door he'd meant to before the attack.

Beyond it was a tiny rock chamber, the same as the one Oscar had appeared in, with nothing inside.

Oscar checked all around the room before heading back into the hallway and setting off again. Each time he arrived at a new room, another assassin would appear with no warning. This happened five times in succession. Sometimes, it was a pair of people, too. Occasionally, they attacked with swords or magic—it all seemed random. All the attackers had in common was that they never spoke, and they vanished without a trace upon sustaining a mortal wound.

"What is going on? Are these ruins just full of ghosts?" Oscar grumbled, unable to make sense of anything, but then he remembered Tinasha saying ghosts didn't exist. In that case, this had to be the result of some magical contrivance.

Puzzled, Oscar continued his search. After he defeated the tenth assailant, the path veered to the right. He peered down the bend cautiously. It looked like a pretty major branching off. Constructing a map in his head, Oscar turned the corner.

The eleventh assailant appeared there, and Oscar's eyes went wide. "Hold on..."

This was a familiar face.

But something was different.

The young woman's long black locks were swaying, as if her hair itself had sentience.

Her eyes were dark as night, and her skin was white as porcelain. Her beauty was cool, clear, and utterly unforgettable.

However, her face was more childish than that of the woman he knew.

The mage girl looked no more than thirteen. Oscar's voice exposed his fearful confusion as he called, "Tinasha?"

She didn't answer, remaining expressionless. Instead, she launched balls of light from her hands. The orbs zigzagged toward him with differing speeds, closing in.

Holding his breath, Oscar took a step forward and sliced through the spells holding the two orbs together. By the time he did, a black vortex was

already upon him. Even as he hesitated, Oscar plunged his sword into the center of it, shattering the vital key hidden inside the spell.

He was prepared for the vortex to injure his arms, yet he only felt a rubbery snap. After nullifying three spells, he closed in on the girl floating in the air. One slice from Akashia tore apart her protective barrier.

He reached his empty hand out to grab her throat.

But in that split second, she disappeared, materializing behind him.

Oscar sensed dense and powerful magic, and a shiver ran through him.

"Ngh!"

He leaped forward without looking back. At the same time, Nark landed on his shoulder and spewed fire behind him, offsetting the girl's own conjured flames. Prickling heat seared Oscar's skin, and the temperature skyrocketed.

It was fortunate nothing worse occurred. If Nark hadn't been there, Oscar could have been killed.

"You saved me, Nark," he said, racing forward and then turning back to face the beautiful girl. Her expression hadn't changed.

With her gaze fixed on him all the while, she raised her right hand, and invisible blades sped forward. Of those razors that sought to encircle him, Oscar cleaved through only the ones that barred the way forward as he pressed in close to the girl. Once more, she tried to weave a spell.

Akashia was faster than her teleportation magic, however. It hit her upstretched arm, and her spell dissolved.

A grim, bitter look on his face, Oscar brought his sword down.

The girl's dark eyes widened.

With her arm and head lopped off, the girl's frame wavered for just a moment before vanishing.

"Disgusting," Oscar spat, feeling a deep sense of despondence.

At the start, he'd been fairly uncertain over whether he should attack her. But Nark's hostile attitude toward the girl convinced Oscar that it wasn't the real Tinasha.

Once he understood that, it simplified things. As Tinasha herself had once said, she was far stronger in such a narrow space and at close range. In fact, this girl's speed and reflexes had been much slower than those of the woman he knew.

"I'm going to have nightmares about that. Ugh, awful," Oscar said, heaving a long sigh as if he could expel that nasty aftertaste.

Nark chirped at him comfortingly, and with a grimace, the king set back off on the path.

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Assailants continued to appear relentlessly.

They varied in strength, making it impossible to pinpoint the origin of their manifestation. The girl from earlier was the only one Oscar recognized.

As he ventured on, dispatching enemies, he kept a mental map of the increasingly mazelike tunnels. He checked his progress first to avoid running into dead ends.

After Oscar departed a tiny, empty room, Nark gave a shrill cry. Before Oscar could even wonder at it, he saw a woman dressed in a white mage's costume. Instinctively, he readied Akashia.

Recognizing him, the woman widened her eyes. Her delicate lips opened to say something, but she had to rush to grab her sword and parry away Akashia's sharp slash.

However, the royal sword's second thrust was faster. She narrowly fended it off while adjusting her stance.

"O-Oscar, wait!"

"You really look just like her," he stated calmly as he lunged for her a third time.

She turned her blade diagonally to catch the blow, but Oscar twisted Akashia along the way, hooking it onto her slender sword and knocking the other weapon to the ground. Flustered, Tinasha next found herself with Oscar slamming her shoulders back against the rock wall with his left arm. He used the hand still gripping Akashia to grab her wrist, pressing his body weight against her to trap her between him and the wall.

She struggled against his hold, trying to escape. Losing her composure, she shouted at him, "I said wait! You're too close! *Way* too close!"

"The more I look at you, the more you seem identical to her."

"I'm the real Tinasha!" she protested.

Oscar swooped in close, then kissed her ear. Before his eyes, her ivory white earlobe turned a deep red.

"W-wait... seriously!" She pleaded with him in a reedy voice that sounded on the verge of tears.

For a bit, Oscar stared blankly at her. Her beauty was even more striking when her face was flushed. Just as she was about to beg him again, he suddenly burst out laughing. Oscar released her and bent down to pick up her sword. "What are you doing here?"

"Hey! Do you finally believe it's really me?!"

"Of course I do. I was only teasing."

"..."

Tinasha glared at him reproachfully, and Oscar smirked. After taking three deep breaths in and out, Tinasha stopped shaking with rage and faced Oscar. Sword back in hand, she pointed at him. "A magic attack made contact with the barrier around you, so I went to Farsas to see what had happened. I heard about the situation from Als, then went to the ruins and spoke to Kumu, and now I'm here."

"What barrier? I had a barrier?"

"You've had it the whole time. It's set to be invisible."

"Since when?"

"Your coronation."

"That's pretty far back," Oscar said, rifling through his memories. Yes, he did recall having a barrier put on him. But something else had happened after that. "Didn't you undo it?"

"I did not. I only enhanced it and camouflaged it," Tinasha explained, and she stuck out her tongue.

So she'd lied about undoing it back during the coronation. And true enough, when he faced off against Druza's forbidden curse, some sort of magic protection the mages had known nothing about had protected him. He barked out a dry laugh upon finally learning the truth.

Tinasha went on matter-of-factly. "It's my barrier, so it's connected to me. I'll know when it repels magic. Did you battle a mage?"

Oscar recalled the fight with the girl. He'd thought his arms would get seriously burned, yet he escaped relatively unharmed. He pointed at Tinasha, grimacing. "I fought a younger version of *you*."

"Oh... so I'm recorded, too, then?" she replied, pulling a face.

Confused, Oscar asked, "Recorded? What does that mean, and what attacked me?"

Tinasha winced. "In short, this place is... a repository of sorts that records people and preserves them."

"*What?*"

It was rare that Oscar didn't immediately grasp the meaning.

Tinasha frowned. "I'm not sure how it operates, but this place captures people and creates duplicates of them. Normally, these copies are merely storage vessels that contain information, but when they sense an intruder, they will materialize to eliminate them."

"So that's what I fought?"

"Yes. In Tuldarr, it's known as the Harvesting. Four hundred years ago, I also came here in search of missing people. It caught me and made a duplicate of me. I thought I'd escaped before the process was finished, but it looks like I was wrong."

"You've been here before?!"

"I wouldn't have been able to find you otherwise. It's only because I got close that I was able to rely on my sense for the barrier on you to forcibly teleport closer," she explained in a huff, cheeks puffed out in annoyance. It looked like she'd taken his teasing seriously.

Tinasha had divulged some useful information. Tuldarr possessed records of these ruins *and* Tinasha was involved. Oscar looked down at her. "So were you the one who blocked off the entrance? It was buried inside a cliff."

"You mean the entrance that you came in from? No. I destroyed all the entrances. This place isn't inside a mountain; I don't know where it is, exactly. Four centuries ago, I came in from a spot in Tuldarr."

"It has multiple entrances?"

"Yes. It can transfer those within and abduct any who are close by. Other entrances may exist, too."

It was certainly quite the account. Shaking off the last of his shock, Oscar posed another question. "Why do you call it the Harvesting? That's a really unsettling name. What happens to the people this place abducts? Are they used to grow mushrooms or something?"

"What an unpleasant mental image... There are no mushrooms. They should be asleep in their duplicates' chambers. I'll show you."

"Thanks," Oscar responded honestly, and Tinasha smiled. It had been a long time since he'd seen her cute side, and he found himself grinning back at her.

The last time we met was when I proposed.

She hadn't given him her reply yet, but Oscar felt no particular sense of urgency.

Tinasha was quite an awkward person. If someone told her to decide with her feelings, she would be lost in confusion for a while. He didn't intend to rush her. She could take her time discovering an answer.

That said, judging by how she looked now, she'd forgotten all about the matter. The young queen had come running in a panic, her mind clearly occupied by the emergency.

"It's this way, Oscar," Tinasha called, beckoning to him. The two set off along the twisting, turning path.

While she paused here and there to waver over which way to go, they made solid progress without needing to turn back at all. Oscar was truly relieved for the rescue. While he'd been trying not to think about it, he had actually lost faith that he'd be able to save everyone.

Oscar glanced at Tinasha walking alongside him and felt the desire to stroke her hair. He asked, "So when a duplicate is defeated, does the person who was captured get freed?"

"They do not. They were all left to sleep, so they eventually die of starvation. The last time I was here, I was devastated to find a mountain of skeletons and bones. That's why we call it the Harvesting."

"Yeah, I can't imagine anyone would be happy to see something like that..."

The initial search party had vanished three days ago. Oscar hoped they hadn't perished yet.

That made Oscar remember the investigative team he'd come in with. "So was everyone else on my team sent to a random place in the ruins like I was?"

"Hmm, they're probably all asleep. I think you were separated because you have Akashia. That made the ruins judge you to be something abnormal. The structure has a disposal chamber," Tinasha explained dispassionately.

"Is *that* why?" Oscar said, glancing down at his beloved sword. True enough, that room he'd been deposited in was the only one littered with

assorted objects. The others had all been empty. Perhaps that had been the area for isolating magic implements.

"That's just a guess, though. This place seems to operate automatically. Honestly, it's all a bunch of things that ordinary magic technology can't detect. It gives me the creeps," Tinasha admitted with a scowl.

Even for her, these ruins were a mystery.

"Automatic..." Oscar repeated. "So there's no one here pulling the strings? Not even a demonic spirit of some kind?"

"At the very least, there wasn't anyone four hundred years ago. This place is a complete enigma."

What was this Harvesting that had been going on for four centuries?

Before Oscar could think too deeply on it, he sensed something and popped his head up. A new assailant had appeared. He was about to ready Akashia to face off against this unknown male mage when the man abruptly exploded.

Surely, Tinasha must have been responsible, and without so much as an incantation or gesture, either. Impressed and awed, Oscar commented, "You're really something, you know that?"

"This seems to have no end. It's all just information, which is how it constructs duplicates."

"Human copies, huh? If that's not normally possible, does that mean that there was a mage capable of the feat long ago?"

"No. The laws of magic are immutable, whether past or present... This place employs something that should, by all rights, be impossible, even for me or a high-ranking demon."

"Something outside the laws of magic... Has there never been anything like that before?"

After an awkward pause, Tinasha replied, "That magic orb."

Oscar recalled the little sphere that had allowed the two of them to meet in the first place. The object's very existence undeniably defied the laws of magic.

Bitterly, Tinasha elaborated. "Ultimately, my people failed to destroy the ruins the last time. We didn't break its automatic defense mechanism."

"So you destroyed the entrances instead?"

"As a last resort, yes. But if it can create other openings elsewhere, then there will be no end to it."

Nodding to himself, Oscar turned the issue over in his head. While the nature of this place was unknown, it had clearly been constructed by a sentient being. And if it *was* made by something that defied the laws of magic, its goal really might be simply to record humans.

Record, collect, store.

Who would review all that information? An absurd mental image of a child lining up a collection of colorful glass marbles on a sunny windowsill surfaced in Oscar's mind.

Children are often cruel. They don't consider others' suffering.

Oscar sighed, fed up with his silly musings. The pair rounded one corner after the next, making progress while defeating enemies. At last, they reached a large door at the end of the passageway. Tinasha placed her hand on it, then paused and looked over her shoulder to Oscar. "How many people have been captured?"

"An entire small village... and our people from the castle. Altogether, a little over three hundred."

"That's so many!" she exclaimed, removing her palm from the door and crossing her arms. After scowling for some time, she glanced up at Oscar. "I'm going to open a transportation array here. You go wake the people inside. They'll be within cocoons, but you can tear through them."

"Oh, I don't like the sound of that one bit..."

"They function as human storage vaults. However, once you open the cocoons, a large number of guardians should appear. I'll take care of those."

"By yourself?"

"I'll be fine. But I may not be able to keep it up for very long, so hurry," Tinasha said. She flashed Oscar a smile but didn't meet his gaze. There was something ephemeral in her face that worried him.

Still, he intended to take the queen of Tuldarr at her word. She wouldn't have made the declaration if she wasn't prepared.

"If you feel you're in danger, call for me. Don't get yourself hurt," Tinasha cautioned.

"I'll do my best."

After flashing Oscar a wry look, she began her incantation. Her dark eyes urged him to go.

Oscar nodded and pushed open the door.

On the other side lay a vast, cavernous space.

There was something of a mystical quality to the air, like one might find in a cathedral. What Oscar saw inside astonished him.

"Whoa..."

The floor was littered with pods the size of adult humans. Each of the white, translucent things was rooted to the ground. Oscar peered into the closest one and saw a man slumped over, his eyes closed. Inside the pod next to him was a skeleton.

These were the cocoons Tinasha had mentioned. Oscar grimaced to see the repugnant things for himself, his stomach turning unpleasantly.

A hand tapped him on the shoulder. Tinasha had finished opening the array. "I'm ready. Go ahead now."

She left Oscar to move deeper into the room. Seemingly in response to her intrusion, a dozen or so guardians materialized in front of the wall at the back of the room. Oscar noticed there was an intricate spell design etched into the surface.

Tinasha stopped. She did not draw her sword but instead outstretched her arms.

"My word defines a metal that shall not become blade. A rift of negation. A painless span of time."

The queen's voice sent shock waves through the chamber. The air changed. More than twenty crescent-shaped crimson blades appeared in midair. After a short inhale, Tinasha whispered in a lyrical voice.

"I reject you."

The words flew for the guardians, who met them expressionlessly.

While Tinasha manipulated the blades, she cried out, "Karr! Senn!"

"Yeah, yeah."

"You called?"

In response to their master's summons, two mystical spirits teleported in on either side of Tinasha. Taking in the scene before them, they frowned.

"We're back here? I hate this place."

"Carry out your orders without complaint, Karr."

Even as they spoke, the two spirits wove elaborate spells. Their intense magic attacks fell upon the guardians like rain.

The guardians, who varied in appearance and gender, vanished one after another, mowed down by magic. However, more appeared just as quickly to take the places of their defeated comrades.

Keeping an eye on the battle at the far end of the room, Oscar moved from one cocoon to the next.

Once he found the one he was looking for, he used Akashia to cut it open. The unsettling pod began to dissolve from the laceration and oozed out, losing its shape. Oscar gave a light kick to the man sleeping inside.

"Doan, wake up!"

After several seconds, the mage groaned. Oscar grabbed Doan's arm and hauled him to his feet. When Oscar saw that Doan was blinking his eyes open, Oscar barked orders at him. "There's a transportation array set up at the door. Cut through the cocoons and help the people inside escape. Get our people from the castle to help once they're awake!"

Doan's expression grew serious. He looked all around him and then shot up. "Y-yes, Your Majesty..."

He probably didn't fully understand the situation, but he headed off to rescue the people sealed up near the door.

Oscar continued opening up the cocoons around him, which mainly contained the Farsas investigative team. The king shook them awake and issued his orders. Once all of his subjects were awake, Oscar hurried for the pods at the back of the chamber.

Karr frowned to see sweat beading on his master's forehead. He and Senn were helping Tinasha battle back the guardians while protecting the cocoons, but she was also maintaining the transportation array simultaneously. It was taxing work to keep a teleportation spell from an unknown location to the outside world going. And while Tinasha was doing that, she was also casting attack magic.

Karr pushed his queen behind him. "Call another two or three, little girl."

For a moment, she gaped at him, but she quickly nodded in agreement.

"Itz, Saiha, Mila, come here."

New spirits appeared. Their faces grew tense once they beheld the situation.

Tinasha sighed and issued orders. "Hold things down here... and try not to hurt anyone."

"Yes, my lady," they replied reverently, which reassured Tinasha to some degree. The queen of Tuldarr took in a deep breath and began a new incantation.

Over a hundred guardians had appeared already, attacking relentlessly. No matter how many fell, new phantoms materialized instantaneously.

Tinasha and her spirits couldn't use magic on too large a scale, so while they were far stronger than the phantoms, this war of attrition was slowly but surely pressing them to exhaustion. Even if Tinasha called more spirits, the vast size of the chamber and the cocoons posed limitations that would make it difficult for them to fight. While it wasn't ideal, all they could do in this situation was keep at it.

"Over there! We're opening that one!" shouted a Farsas soldier among a group.

They ran over to a cocoon behind Tinasha and the spirits, shouting to one another as they did. However, they were brought up short by the distinctive and peculiar sight of the spirits.

Tinasha turned and faced the soldiers with a smile. "Please, go ahead."

That snapped them back to their senses, and they quickly cut into the nearest cocoons. Then the group escorted the emaciated villagers to the door.

Unfortunately, a phantom appeared by them. By the time Tinasha noticed, the guardian was about to bring his sword down upon a child. A wave of her hand was all it took to crush the thing. The soldiers helped the kid toward the safety of the door.

Tinasha breathed a sigh as she watched the child's mother carry him off. Her relief was fleeting, however, as she nearly lost her balance from twisting herself backward to stop the guardian.

"Ah!"

Her arms flailed in the air but could find no purchase—until she fell back against a man who was there to steady her. He pulled her fully upright and gazed searchingly into her dark eyes.

"That was close."

"Oscar!"

"Can you keep going for a little longer?" he asked fervently, unwaveringly.

Tinasha smiled. She loved hearing him urge her to fight and the feeling of his unshakable belief in her.

And she wanted to fulfill his request. She wished to stand tall, even if she was alone.

The world was neither a kind place nor a cruel one. It simply existed as it was.

Everything was both exceptional and commonplace. Only what was possible would happen.

Tinasha understood that, which was why she refused to quit.

"I'm all right. I can keep going," she assured Oscar with a nod, straightening her posture to face her enemies.

The young woman told herself there was nothing she couldn't overcome.

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Nearly fifteen minutes after the battle began, the Farsas investigative team had rescued roughly 90 percent of the people from the cocoon chamber.

As Tinasha watched the soldiers opening the remaining dozen or so cocoons scattered around the corners of the room, her face suddenly contorted in pain. "Ngh..."

Something was applying pressure to close the transportation array, and the force of it was falling on the caster, Tinasha. That unknown power weighed down on her with brutal intensity. The attack sought to wipe the spell away. Anyone besides the queen of Tuldarr would have crumpled and perished beneath the force of the opposition.

Even Tinasha would have difficulty holding out against this until everyone could escape.

The color drained from her face, but her dark eyes remained fierce and determined. Oscar, who was fighting by her side with Akashia in hand, was the first to notice.

"Tinasha?"

He gave her a concerned look and used his thumb to wipe away the sweat gathering on her forehead. Tinasha's eyes closed in a pained blink. "The enemy... is trying to block me... It's trying to force my portal closed..."

Oscar watched the signs of desperate struggle cross Tinasha's face, and then he had a thought.

Look ahead.

New guardians weren't popping up as quickly as before, nor were there as many of them.

That alone wasn't enough to conclude that the enemy's power was waning. But perhaps it was diverting some amount of strength into that force working against Tinasha.

Glancing at the faintly glowing spell design carved into the back wall, Oscar made up his mind. "Tinasha, let me have your sight."

"Hmm?"

The young woman's eyes grew round and wide, but she nodded and touched his hand, whispering a short incantation.

"Please don't go overboard..."

"There are times when that's the only option. I'll be fine," Oscar said. Then he took a deep breath.

The world changed immediately.

It wasn't just the magic in the air; he'd already been able to see that. Lines of even thicker magic emerged all over the place.

Tinasha's vision allowed him to see that multiple layers were intertwined within that complex, overly elaborate design on the wall. The network of luminous threads was like ivy, entirely covering some portions of the stone facade. Oscar stared at it coldly.

He squeezed Tinasha's hand tightly. "Stay right here."

Leaving her with those few powerful words, Oscar took off. Slipping through the vanguard of the five spirits, he charged into the army of guardians. A stroke of Akashia repelled the blades that came rushing to meet him from all directions.

Magic hurled at the king vanished before finding its mark, probably thanks to the spirits. Still perched on Oscar's shoulder, Nark extended its neck and breathed flame to drive away the phantoms pursuing him from the sides.

If I waste time here, I'm going to get swallowed up.

Oscar cut down a guardian blocking his way and continued his advance.

Before long, he was at the wall. With his gaze still trained on it, he swung Akashia and cleaved through a guardian trying to attack him from behind. As he stared up at the glowing surface, his gaze lingered on one point in the center.

"That's it."

Several paces to the right, a large, transparent crystal sphere was embedded in the wall. It was large enough to reach the floor. An intricate spell configuration rested within it, and Oscar recognized that the complex magic was revolving in place.

Oscar moved to the orb and stabbed Akashia into it without hesitation.

A clear cracking sounded through the chamber.

Akashia's hilt grew hot. But it passed in a second, and the crystal sphere shattered to pieces. Just like the guardians, the shards that went flying vanished into thin air like phantoms.

Then the entire room *lurched*. A horrible, violent sound like metal grating together echoed from every direction.

"Ngh..."

The uncomfortable sensation of a rapid pressure change swept over everyone. Reflexively, Oscar put his hands on his ears as screams erupted from all over. Some were even doubled over on the ground, clutching their heads.

Yet the pandemonium ceased as quickly as it came.

Oscar looked around and found that all the guardians had vanished. The wall that had shone brightly with power was now dark.

"You destroyed... the core?" Tinasha whispered, disbelief plain in her tone. Oscar turned back to see her free from the pressure that had been weighing on her, but also astonished. When Tinasha was surprised, she looked just like a little kid. It was precious. Just looking at her made him start laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Your face."

"Is now the time?!"

Her outraged reaction only amused him further. Oscar was about to take a step when he heard a low voice full of resentment mutter in his ear, "You damn insider..."

When Oscar looked around, no one was there.

"What? Some kind of trick?" he wondered aloud. After shaking his head, he hurried to Tinasha's side.

She was still shocked at how abruptly everything had come to an end. "How did you do that...?"

"What do you mean, 'how'? It had one of those vital points."

"Yes, but there were many others that looked just as genuine. How did you know that one was the true core?"

"Intuition."

"You really are something abnormal," Tinasha replied with a sigh. Her expression was a mix of exasperation and admiration.

The enigmatic ruins that even the Witch Killer Queen and her spirits could do nothing about four hundred years ago had now been unceremoniously silenced and their mechanism dismantled by the Akashia swordsman.

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All the villagers had been safely evacuated. Tinasha was the last one to depart the ruins. She looked back at the cave passageway, checking to make sure no one was there, then lifted a hand toward the entrance. Lightning shot from her palm, sending deep tremors far back along the passage.

The rupture set off a cave-in that culminated in the collapse of the access to the ruins.

Tinasha watched until the shaking ceased, then turned back around with a shrug. "This should do. Since the mechanism is destroyed, we could have left it open and intact, but I wouldn't feel right about that."

"Yep. Thanks, you really saved us," Oscar replied.

"I should be thanking you for destroying the core."

Her dark eyes were narrowed, as if she were gazing into some distant past. That calm, self-possessed, and yet melancholic gaze was the hallmark of Tinasha's queenly persona. It was clear she was thinking of the people of Tuldarr she had failed to rescue. The look drew Oscar in inexorably.

Rather than act upon that feeling, however, he decided to inquire about a different matter. "What do you think made those ruins in the first place?"

"Hmm... I'm curious, but I don't have any clue at all. It's something outside the laws of magic, which means I haven't the faintest idea."

"But aren't there lots of things humans don't know about on other planes of existence?"

Indeed, Tinasha was the one who informed Oscar that their world was like an endless stack of transparent pages all existing in the same place. Humans only comprehended a fraction of the total pages. Oscar's remark was meant to point out that something on a different plane might exist outside the usual rules.

However, Tinasha shook her head. "I think you may have misunderstood. The laws of magic are called that because they exist on the laws of magic's plane of existence, but they do apply to other planes as well. That's why humans can use spells here... It's no different from the laws of our so-called world itself. Even though our world is made up of multiple planes of existence, it is not divided into those separate planes—it's all one world. My degree of sight may be different from yours, but that doesn't change what exists, does it?"

With a snap of Tinasha's fingers, a pale spray of magic flared to life. Oscar could see it because of the magical sight drills she had put him through. And as the preeminent mage of her era, Tinasha could view much, much more than he could. But that didn't mean the world itself was different.

"Thus, it's possible that a law outside the laws of magic exists. But one that contradicts the laws of magic cannot exist on another plane. That would be like repudiating the world itself."

"I... think I get it?" Oscar answered doubtfully. He had a vague sense of comprehension. The clear water near the pond's surface and the water down at the bottom were very different, but they both shared the characteristic of being from the same pond.

With that in mind, he asked, "Then what about something beyond this world?"

Tinasha's eyes widened like a cat's. "What?"

"You said that the different planes of this world all share the same laws. So then what if it's coming from outside all that?"

"From beyond the world... What is that supposed to mean? Don't bring up something so absurd from out of the blue."

"You're the one who said that something going against a law of magic would put it at odds with the world."

"But that doesn't mean jumping straight to the idea that another world might exist."

"Has it been proved that one doesn't?" Oscar pressed. For him, these were all perfectly natural questions to ask.

Tinasha fell silent, utterly flummoxed. She pressed a hand to her mouth. "It hasn't been... proved, no... But even so... it's impossible to verify the nonexistence of anything past our world."

"Yeah, I bet it would be. There's no telling how many different planes there are here," Oscar reasoned. His remark about another world had been an off-the-cuff musing. Verifying it any further would be difficult. Yet the subdued look in Tinasha's dark eyes betrayed that she was stuck on the possibility.

She was sinking deep into the ocean of her thoughts. Oscar watched her studiously.

He was well acquainted with the siren's beauty she possessed.

Tinasha was a queen and a young girl all at once. A fearsome mage... and just a very adorable person.

Finally noticing Oscar's eyes upon her, Tinasha looked up. For a second, her face paled as if she'd remembered something, then she immediately turned red. As Oscar watched steam virtually pour off her face, he recalled that she hadn't given him an answer to his proposal yet.

She was clearly wavering over what she should say. With a serious expression, Oscar said, "You can give me an answer whenever you're ready."

The proposal must have seemed a preemptive strike with no warning. Tinasha jumped like a cat when its tail was pulled. Blushing even deeper, she looked down and away. "I'm very sorry for keeping you waiting..."

"No, I don't mind. How many marriage proposals have you gotten since then? I know other countries must have sent some."

A pause. "Seven."

"Wow. Which nations?" Oscar inquired, making no effort to hide his displeasure.

"What's with that face?! I'm not telling you! They all just want to have me as their weapon anyway!" Tinasha cried, looking ready to fight.

"Hmm, I wouldn't be so sure."

Undoubtedly, lots of foreign powers coveted Tinasha as an instrument of war, but Oscar didn't think that was the only motivation. He knew that on the day of her coronation, she must have unknowingly captivated the hearts of many who witnessed her in the flesh.

But I'm the one who knows her better than any other.

Tinasha pouted at Oscar, then, in a small voice, asked, "What is it you like about me...?"

"How weird you are."

"What sort of an answer is that?" Tinasha shot back, deflated. But she picked herself back up quickly enough and let out a long exhale to reset her mood. Brushing long strands of black hair from her face, the queen of Tuldarr looked up at Oscar with a profound quality to her gaze. "You know nothing about me."

A gentle breeze whooshed past.

The rescued villagers received medical care and were then escorted back to their homes, starting with those who had the energy to move. More help arrived from the castle before long, and the atmosphere grew thick with activity and conversation. However, no one disturbed Oscar and Tinasha.

Peering toward Tuldarr to the northwest, Tinasha stated, "They called me the ice queen. You'll find all sorts of things if you research my history—not everything, though. I made decisions that would be considered unthinkable in this era. That's the sort of person I am."

The words were soft, but her voice was tinged with pain. Slowly, Tinasha's dark eyes closed as if that could lock up the night.

"I don't intend to make excuses and say that I had to do what I did because it was the Dark Age and because I was the queen... After I abdicated, I went to see my parents once under the strictest secrecy. It was the first and last time I met with them. We could barely hold a conversation, and it wasn't like I could live with them or anything... I missed my parents to death when I was little, but I had no idea what to do upon finally reuniting. In the end, I chose to put myself to sleep using magic... That's how coldhearted I am."

The halting way Tinasha spoke made her sound no different than a little girl.

Her eyes remained closed. Oscar could see her awkward former self in her expression, and he grinned with fondness.

"I know you'll regret it once you realize who I am. Spending your life with me, that is..."

"Oh yeah? Tell me everything, then."

"..."

Her silence was neither a yes nor a no.

Tinasha simply stood there, rooted in place and all alone, just as she undoubtedly had four centuries ago.

Oscar reached out to brush a thumb along her cheek. "You can tell me whatever you like. I don't mind if you keep some things hidden. Whatever you need, I'm fine either way. Knowing everything won't change the way I feel."

"That's a lot of up-front promises you may not be able to make good on."

"Careful not to sell me too short."

Her long lashes stirred. Tinasha gazed up at Oscar, black eyes glimmering and damp. A trackless sea of loneliness rocked within them.

The next words from Oscar's lips sank deep into her soul.

"Your oddities are amusing, and I enjoy your strengths *and* your weaknesses. I like the decisions you make, how you carry yourself, how childish you are, and the queen in you as well. I think the way you live your life is beautiful, even if that's only one part of who you are."

Knowing everything wasn't necessary to Oscar. Even if he did, he wouldn't come to regret his actions.

He knew how deeply compassionate she was—the way she was as innocent as a little girl and how she could choose to be queen.

That look of longing for the way the people lived on the night he found her gazing toward the city during the festival was all he needed to understand about her. That was likely the moment he began falling in love with her. The only thing was that he couldn't allow himself to feel that way at the time.

Tinasha winced. A red flush tinted her pale complexion. "I don't understand your taste."

"You don't have to. My preferences are mine. Let me keep them."

Tinasha puffed up her cheeks, pouting. "Just so you know, I never hoped for anything from you."

"Is that right?"

"I came here to be useful to you."

"I know. Like an uninvited bride."

"That's totally wrong!" Tinasha balled her hands into fists. But once she'd settled back down, she asked in a much calmer voice, "So you really think you won't have any regrets?"

"Nope."

This was his choice. He wouldn't lament it. And should such a day come, he wouldn't cower from the past.

Staring straight into her dark eyes still heavy with worry, Oscar said, "I want to live my life with you. Can't I be selfish and follow my heart just once in my lifetime?"

Just like how she had once abandoned everything to go and see him.

If he had to devote his entire life to his country, he would spend it at her side.

The way he bared his heart to Tinasha left her too overwhelmed to speak. But soon enough, she lifted her head, biting her lip. "I understand. I also kept you waiting without any word from me at all. I've spent too long dawdling, so I will give you my answer now."

"You were dawdling, were you?"

"Hush!"

Tinasha took a deep breath and straightened up. Her face suddenly shifted from that of a girl's into something sincere and serious.

Clear, strangely familiar eyes fixed directly on Oscar. "If you'll have me, then I gratefully accept your proposal."

As hard as quartz. That was what her emotions were like. It wasn't merely a crush, or an attachment, or puppy love—she had made up her mind to live with him.

Tinasha stumbled a little once she finished her sentence, perhaps from all the recent strain. Oscar wrapped her in an embrace. The feel of her delicate frame enclosed within his arms made him break into a smile. He was so happy, he didn't know what to do. Oscar felt like a boy again.

When he pressed a kiss to the smooth skin of her cheek, she blushed and looked away. "You're too close."



"Get used to it," Oscar replied, his words succinct but full of affection, as he savored the feeling of his bride in his arms.

Neither of them paid any mind to the shocked citizens all around them.

The king of Farsas had chosen this awkward woman to be his partner in life. His wish was that she would always be smiling; his hope was that her loneliness would abate. He would cherish her more than anything and walk through life at her side.

Oscar was confident that he would never meet anyone better to spend his days with.

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Tinasha wriggled free and floated up into the air to keep from being crushed to death in Oscar's embrace. She pressed her palms to her cheeks, which were still flushed pink. "I ran off to come help you, so I need to be getting back. I had one of the spirits impersonate me, but people will probably figure that out before long."

"A queen shouldn't be sneaking out," Oscar scolded.

"You of all people do not get to say that! You put yourself on your own survey team!" she cried.

She was about to teleport away when Oscar grabbed her hand. "Once I get back to Farsas Castle, I'm going to send you an official messenger and letter."

"Oh? Do you mean you want to go public with our engagement?"

"Of course. Or maybe I should go harass those seven countries," he said arrogantly.

Frowning, Tinasha replied, "Don't." Lowering herself a little, she placed a hand on Oscar's shoulder. "You better not tell me you assumed I'd definitely say yes."

"I didn't think that. You're completely unpredictable, after all."

"Hmph." Tinasha stuck out her lower lip.

It doesn't feel real yet.

For her, Oscar was someone who was accessible, in a sense, but also someone she could never dare to stand beside.

All this time, Tinasha had believed he had no interest in her and so left her feelings about him alone. Now that she knew she was wrong, she wanted to bury herself in a hole for how strangely embarrassing it all felt. His gaze and hands on her made it difficult to relax. Would she really get used to it someday?

Oscar reached for Tinasha's cheek and laid a gentle hand along it. He seemed reluctant to part. "Come see me anytime."

"I will take you up on that," Tinasha answered with a pleased smile, and then she vanished.

Oscar smiled wryly as he mulled over the many ways she would make for an unprecedented queen of Farsas.

While they couldn't marry for another year, there were preparations to be done now. First, Oscar needed to propose to her formally. As he drew up a list in his head of all the things he needed to do, Oscar turned around and stepped into the transportation array that took him and his attendants back home.

Something like a hunch told him that within what he believed to be luck, there were many overlapping memories.

■ 5. Contagious Hopes

The little room was just as gloomy and dark inside as ever.

The young man who was the owner of the estate sank into a chair, a letter from the outside world in his hand. It was only one sheet of paper, the message brief and concise. He gave it a glance and then ignited it in his grip.

He ended up blurting out some of the doom and gloom he had intended to keep to himself. "Ugh... it is such a pain subduing the impatient."

"Did they say something to you again?" Miralys inquired. She was seated in a chair on the opposite side of the room. While Valt was in a plush, upholstered one, hers was a simple wooden thing. Miralys was quite picky when it came to her surroundings, down to her preference for sitting in something free of ornamentation.

While keeping his voice light, Valt groused, "I understand why they want to hurry and get to the battle, but still..."

"Perhaps they'll learn if they rush on out and mess up."

"That does sound interesting, but we don't have any substitutes. We have to use them at the exact right time," he replied with a bitter, long-suffering smile.

Miralys furrowed her brow. "Why have they made Farsas their enemy anyway? Is the grass really that greener on the other side?"

"I'm sure that's part of it. Farsas is one of the top two nations in all our land, and it has Akashia. People like them seek nothing more than to bring Farsas to its knees."

"How pathetic."

"That's harsh, Miralys," Valt remarked, resting one elbow on the armrest of the chair and his chin on his hand. He looked to be deep in thought.

"Oh, I heard that some strange ruins were uncovered in Farsas. Was that your doing?" Miralys asked.

"No, it wasn't. That place was the work of an outsider—a perfect coincidence, you might call it. This latest rewrite has really left wide-reaching ramifications. All sorts of things that were buried in history are

coming to light. It's like digging through the sand on a beach and arriving at some wholly different place."

"Doesn't that mean the world is converging toward the true future?"

"It should be, yes. We may have found that one last straw we've been waiting for," Valt answered blandly, but Miralys didn't miss the flash of dark intent that passed across his eyes. He stared at a fixed point on the wall. "If the world has started to move, then we need to hurry, too. They successfully dismantled those ruins. She really is the key—the strongest mage and spirit sorcerer in history. Even weakened, she still has great potential."

Which was why they had to act swiftly, but discreetly. There was no guaranteeing the same timeline would come around a second time.

Valt stood and glanced at the clock. "I've got to get going. So much to prepare. Those two aren't the sort you can run into and fight head-on, after all." Miralys walked over to Valt as he massaged his stiff shoulders. He looked down at her and, abruptly, his face turned serious. "Miralys, power is only power in the end. It will always be linked to the mental state of its user. What matters is not how much strength you have; it's how well you can wield it."

"I know that."

In all the land, they were the only allies the other had. Everyone else was a pawn, including the most powerful woman.

Miralys and Valt exchanged glances. And then, with an incantation, vanished into thin air.

The plans proceeded apace.

Not even the two of them knew what the future would bring. But the pair believed this was the only path they could take, and that it would eventually take them to their desired end.

There was nothing to be done about the leisurely flow of time. The living beings within could only writhe desperately.

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News of the queen of Tuldarr's engagement sent shock waves through the major nations of the continent.

The announcement also rendered it impossible for any other country to impede Tuldarr's system change.

Farsas and Tuldarr were to be united. No country wanted to make an enemy of two nations so inherently powerful despite their differences in characteristics. Those who had thought they would use Tinasha's abdication as their chance to win her over to their nation cursed Farsas for getting there first.

Few people understood that the engagement was not a political one.

The beautiful queen at the center of the commotion entered her council room with a grimace. "Members of the council."

At the moment, Tuldarr was discussing all manner of items concerning the adoption of a parliamentary system. Countless meetings had already been held so far. While drawing up a formal adoption plan was not a smooth process, it was progressing bit by bit each day. The assembly would hear the opinions of Legis and his magistrates, the mages and scholars, and the merchants and local representatives, then carefully fine-tune the plan.

Once the council members at the meeting table saw the queen enter, each of them looked as if they wanted to say something. This was the first time half of them had seen her since the engagement. Tinasha greeted them, suppressing the heat rising to her cheeks.

"As I'm sure all of you know, I will marry into Farsas after I abdicate. However, my engagement does not mean that there will be any changes in Tuldarr's new government. I hope that my marriage will contribute to friendly relations between our two nations and that we will continue to work well together."

She had tried to speak as calmly as possible, but she couldn't keep the faintest hint of a blush off her face.

All the members were delighted to see their queen looking so youthful and offered her their congratulations.

That was the only unscheduled item on their agenda. The council members, not at all concerned with formalities, moved right along to the main topic of discussion. People could exchange opinions freely there, regardless of social status.

The chief royal mage stroked his beard as he said, "The continent has so few precedents to reference for a parliamentary system..."

"Evidently, the small nation of Tyle in the south once had a similar method in place. However, the records state that a house speaker with overwhelming support rewrote the laws and made it a dictatorship. A decade later, the people revolted, and the country fell."

"So the conditions we set for amending laws are crucial, then."

"We could either require the regent's approval or not. Should the two pillars of regent and parliament be equal, or should one be superior to the other?"

Tinasha listened to each member's opinions and offered thoughts of her own. Her expression held no traces of the bashfulness she'd had upon entering the room. She wore the face of one laboring to change her country.

The meeting lasted close to three hours. While the discussion was very lively, only a few things were settled—and it was possible they'd be revised in the future.

Some had asserted that this step-by-step progress was going at a snail's pace because they were all being too cautious, but Tinasha thought that was fine at this stage. They were at peace, so they could take their time and avoid coming off as too high-handed. Surely, Legis felt the same way.

If fate brought me to this era, then I want to work hard to make the most of it.

That was Tinasha's answer and her feelings for her homeland.

Upon returning to her study after the meeting concluded, Tinasha spread out the papers she had brought back on her desk and smiled wanly. "We have a lot of work to do."

The mage Renart, who had come to give her a report on another matter, nodded. "It won't be built in a day, after all. I hope that the result will be satisfying to all."

"I do, too," said Tinasha.

Lilia placed a cup of tea before her master. The spirit glanced at the documents on the desk and laughed. "The only thing that's changed in four hundred years is how tall the stack of papers is. There's been no progress at all."

"That's because there were only books and ledgers back then, not loose sheets. Things have gotten easier, at the very least."

"How were reports like mine given without documents?" Renart inquired, curious.

Tinasha grinned at him mischievously. "All of them were given orally. If it were still like that now, you'd never be able to leave this room."

With a hand, she motioned to the stack of papers Renart was carrying. The man's expression stiffened. The queen brought her teacup to her mouth with a grin.

Lilia threw the tray into the air, and it disappeared. "Putting that aside, I thought you'd be more relaxed once you were engaged, Lady Tinasha. That doesn't seem to be so."

"Pff—"

Tinasha choked on her drink and coughed violently.

Lilia went on blithely. "Before getting engaged, you were so bothered by the question of it and fretted *endlessly*. Yet now you're in such an exhilarated state that you can't calm down. I've seen you smiling to yourself over nothing, pacing around, and flailing in bed."

"Y-you're wrong about all that!" Tinasha protested, slamming her hands on the desk and jumping to her feet. Snatching up her teacup, she held it as she began to pace around the study. "The w-wedding won't be for another year... And it counts as a political union, too, you know."

As she conjured excuses no one had asked for, a rosy hue colored her cheeks. She stopped in her tracks, gazing down at her reflection on the surface of the tea in her cup. "It's true that I... I-love him, yes..."

The words were nearly inaudible, and Tinasha went scarlet. Her smile was shy, though she was overflowing with happiness.

The picture she painted, beaming with joy in the throes of her first love, made her nothing more than a girl full of anticipation for her own wedding.

Seeing his lady like this caused Renart to grin. Lilia, however, only shrugged. "You're like this all the time in your chambers now. Why don't you just go marry him already?"

"I have work to do, thank you!" Tinasha snapped tartly, draining her cup before marching back to her desk.

Hiding his smile, Renart placed a new set of papers on the desk. "All right, please look these over."

He launched into an explanation of the most pressing issues for the queen to handle. Tinasha had to take care of her usual duties that were separate from setting up the new system. Legis had aided with some of these tasks in the past, but she tended to deal with almost all of them herself. However, when Tinasha settled problems, she was frequently told there was no precedent for her resolution method. Thus, she had to show some manner of restraint. Any resentment she incurred would negatively affect the switch to the new government. This wasn't the Dark Age, where citizens submitted to absolute power.

Renart finished his explanation and then placed another three pages on the desk. "These are about an inspection of that academy in the town of Latuchet, which is scheduled for three days from now."

"Oh, the Academy of Magic. I've been a little curious about that," Tinasha replied, scanning the papers.

Four hundred years ago, Tuldarr acted as a city-state, and the majority of its people lived around the palace. But at present, towns and villages outside the main city dotted the country. These other settlements were not as large as those in Farsas because Tuldarr's territory dwarfed its population. The place Renart had mentioned was a midsize town about half a day's travel to the west of the capital.

"It's very interesting to have an academy for the children of mages," Tinasha commented. "In old Tuldarr, it was customary to have personal tutors give lessons in controlling magic, but it's certainly just as possible to teach students in a group setting."

"Those who come only for lessons in controlling magic graduate in about a year, but those who want to become proper mages live at the academy until the age of sixteen. Classes aren't divided by age, but by levels of magic. Many of our royal mages are alumni," explained Renart.

"That sounds so fun. Do you think I could change how old I look and sneak in as a student?"

"Please don't," the man replied immediately, and Tinasha's head sunk in disappointment.

Tinasha's palace tutoring had accommodated her interests, but the idea of a school was appealing to the young woman who had grown up without peers. She wanted to enroll in some classes, but considering her position, she could only go for a royal inspection. Still, she was very excited about the upcoming visit.

An unhappy expression crossed Renart's face. "However, a few students have disappeared recently..."

"Huh? What do you mean? They've gone missing?"

“Well, some of them have simply dropped out and fled on their own, so we can’t quite say that. But all have vanished into thin air, along with their belongings, baffling their friends and teachers. As of this month, there have been five so far.”

“That’s a lot.”

The school must have been strict to have five runaway dropouts. That was a worrisome problem all on its own.

After thinking for a bit, Tinasha looked up. “Understood. During my inspection, I’d also like to do some investigating, so make the necessary preparations.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I have someone in mind who graduated from the academy and would be perfect for the job. I’ll have her show you around.”

“Thank you,” Tinasha said, handing Renart a document with her specifications listed. He took it and departed straightaway.

A heap of tasks still awaited Tinasha’s review, and the list of duties she had to take over was just as lengthy.

Still, the young queen took great satisfaction in her busy schedule. Tuldarr was so different from how it had been in her era, and that reminded her that she was walking in the footsteps of those who had labored hard to bring the country to this point.

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There were four locations of the Academy of Magic in Tuldarr, and all were nationally run. In addition to the one in the capital, each region of the country had a school. Most of the children attendees, who came from the neighboring towns and villages, were there to learn how to control their magic. Half of those would stay to become mages, while a handful of *those* would reach royal mage status. The academies were a training facility for the next generation.

“This is a pretty big structure. How many are living here now?” asked Tinasha.

“There are fifty-two children here to learn how to control their magic, while we have sixty-eight students studying to become mages,” the headmaster replied.

“So there are more mage students? That’s a bit surprising, considering how long they stay,” remarked Tinasha, looking about with keen interest as she received a tour of the Latuchet Academy of Magic.

The academy, at which all the students boarded, was home to more than one hundred students and had been founded roughly one hundred and fifty years before. Magic wards shimmered around the polished wood-paneled corridor, which was a giant ring that ran the perimeter of the school building. Six octagonal classrooms were set along the inside of it. From above, the building resembled a beehive. During the school’s construction, Tuldarr’s ruler had designed it to optimize and enhance magical power.

"I'm sure it's only natural for an academy of magic, but it does seem quite easy to get lost in here," Tinasha mused, which made the mages in her guard retinue smile uneasily. In contrast, the academy headmaster's expression turned complicated. The older man must have known that agreeing with her or refuting her would've appeared disrespectful to the queen, so he simply said nothing.

Tinasha gazed out a window on the third floor protected by a film of water. Past the circular academy, lush green gardens rolled out in all directions.

She pointed to a small wooden building in a corner of the grounds and asked, "What's that over there?"

"That is the school for the local children. As part of the academy students' lessons, they sometimes act as instructors there, so it was built on our grounds."

"Oh, how fascinating. It's true enough that teaching does often mean learning as well," Tinasha responded.

Children were playing outside the building. Judging by their plain attire, it looked like all of them routinely helped out around their homes.

As Tinasha observed the charming sight, the headmaster broached a topic with some trepidation. "Er, actually... Once the town children heard that Your Majesty would be visiting, several of them begged to attend your lecture, too..."

"Oh? That's quite all right by me, but the content will be difficult."

Tinasha was scheduled to give a lesson to academy students. The younger pupils could attend as well, but the material would likely be challenging for local children who weren't enrolled.

The headmaster bobbed his head gratefully. "They are all aware of that and simply want to catch a glimpse of Your Majesty. We will ensure they behave..."

"I don't mind at all. Let anyone interested attend," Tinasha said with a smile, and the headmaster looked relieved. "Now, let's discuss the recent disappearances. Please make sure to tell me everything you can."

In truth, it wasn't so unusual for students to vanish from an Academy of Magic.

The younger students who were there to learn magic control ranged in age from five to thirteen. They had to live away from their parents and families to attend the academy, and several—particularly the older ones—got homesick, dropped out, and ran away. Most were found quickly, but some proved elusive for one reason or another.

However, the academy did not dispatch frantic search parties for the truants because it prized an innate desire to learn.

"But five missing students in a month? You should really go out and look for them," grumbled Tinasha before her scheduled lecture.

A female mage with dark blond hair who was with the queen gave a strained smile and nodded. "The academy is indeed still searching.

However, two of the missing students were friends. One was twelve, and another thirteen. They may have gone to another country."

This woman was Pamyra, the person Renart had referred Tinasha to for assistance during her visit. She was a graduate of this academy and a royal mage. She and Renart were friends who trusted each other's abilities.

Tinasha examined the documents outlining the situation. "One fifteen-year-old mage student and four younger students aged thirteen, twelve, ten, and five. The thirteen-year-old and twelve-year-old disappeared at the same time, while the others vanished separately. That five-year-old is especially worrisome..."

"Once the youngest went missing, the academy finally realized that these were unusual circumstances. The other kids were in communication with their families but never made it home, while the five-year-old was an orphan who lost his parents in an explosion of his own magic, so there was no one to contact."

Tinasha frowned upon hearing that. Accidents like that were the reason children born with magic had to learn control. Tuldarr was home to the only Academy of Magic institutions because it had so many mages. In other countries, children would go to a city or town to learn from mages there. Tuldarr's system greatly reduced the number of unfortunate incidents, but it was impossible to prevent all of them.

Pamyra went on, her voice tinged with sadness. "The five-year-old had just come to the school and was struggling to fit in to the environment. The other four were experiencing doubts about their studies and were very interested in other countries, so they all had reasons to run away. We've heard from other students that the pair who left together had worked out a plan of escape."

"So what you're saying is that if the disappearances weren't all clustered together, it wouldn't be so strange for those kids to have run away?" Tinasha inquired.

"It's possible that once the first student made off, it emboldened the others to do the same," Pamyra replied.

"How odd," remarked Tinasha, flicking the papers away into the air and crossing her arms. After sinking into thought, she asked Pamyra, "What do you think? Is this all just a coincidence?"

Did the queen really need to investigate further on top of the academy's own efforts?

Pamyra's face turned serious, and she stated, "No. I think the students were specifically chosen because their absence wouldn't come as a surprise. It's very suspicious that we haven't been able to get in touch with any of them at all."

There was confidence in Pamyra's eyes. Tinasha liked her spirit and smiled. "Then let's look into it. I'd like to have you interview the pupils."

"We happen to have one student who's due to start as a royal mage next month. I'll work together with her to speak to everyone."

"Thank you. It's about time for my lesson to start," Tinasha said, getting to her feet. The mage standing before the door to the lecture hall bowed to her and opened it. A cloth covered the entrance, but the students had already taken their seats and were abuzz. Tinasha lifted the skirt of her long mage's robes and stepped in. Once the queen appeared, everyone fell silent.

Tinasha's petite frame brimmed with power, and her innate beauty was startling. She moved with the grace and bearing of a sovereign royal, drawing and commanding attention.

The audience's eyes were glued to this beautiful creature, at once perfect and at the same time somewhat contradictory.

She ascended the lecturer's dais and looked around the semicircular hall. Mage students were seated at the front, with the younger students behind them. The town children were packed into the corners.

After surveying her audience, she broke into a smile. "My name is Tinasha As Meyer Ur Aeterna Tuldarr. Thank you very much for coming today."

It was a crisp, simple address that didn't match her appearance.

Tinasha gave a snap of her ivory fingers, and a pale blue flame flickered to life. It took the shape of a horse and galloped through the air. After making a circuit above the students' heads, it vanished. The mage students were astonished by the queen's technique, while the children let out gasps of wonder, their eyes sparkling.

"All right, let's begin the lecture. I won't speak for too long, so get comfortable and listen."

The queen launched into a discussion of magic and the makeup of the planes of existence in the world.

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"The queen was *amazing*," Rudd said with a sigh as he flopped onto the grass. He was an eleven-year-old who attended the local school built on the academy's premises. Once word got out that the queen would be visiting, he and a dozen others had begged to be let in the lecture hall. The rest of the kids had been unable to ask because they'd gotten sick or were busy with chores. Rudd planned to brag about it to them the next day. A girl sat down next to him, and he looked over at her. "Hmm?"

"So here's where you were, Rudd," she commented, while rapping him on the shoulder.

He'd been daydreaming, but that brought him back to his senses and jogged his memory of his old friend's name. "Juliya! What are you doing here?"

Until yesterday, she'd been sick, so she hadn't attended the lecture. Rudd had planned to describe it for her later.

The freckled girl grinned. "I just got here, so I missed the queen's talk. How was it?"

"Incredible. We have these things called planes of existence in our world, and there are a bunch all stacked on top of one another. We can't see them, but there's one made up of just magic and one that's totally dark inside, and lots more. That's what she said."

"And you thought that was interesting?"

"Well, yeah. It's really cool. The world is a lot bigger than just the parts we know about. Tuldarr is trying to solve all the mysteries of the world."

Rudd knew he couldn't become a mage as someone with no magic. But despite that, he was proud to be a citizen of Tuldarr. Sitting up, he clenched his fists. "When I'm older, I definitely wanna work in the castle. That'll make it easier to support my mom, too."

His father had passed when he was young, leaving his mother to raise the boy alone. A job in the palace would earn Rudd good money, and the future of Tuldarr that the queen had spoken of sounded awfully appealing.

"Whether people have magic or not, everyone's working together to build our country. The queen said that in the future, a bunch of representatives from a bunch of cities are gonna rule Tuldarr with the king. That sounds pretty exciting to me."

"I don't really get it," Juliya replied with a very adult-looking shrug. Having not attended the lecture, it all sounded like something distant to her. She hugged her knees to her chest. "Anyway, I heard the people from the castle are looking into all the missing academy students."

"Oh... like what happened to Teull."

While the academy mage students and local kids were taught on the same campus, they weren't all that close. The mages in training were usually busy with their other classes, so the town children only knew the names of those who acted as instructors. However, the younger students were close in age to the town children, so the two groups played together often.

Teull was five, and had only recently come to the school. He didn't play with the other kids, instead sitting crouched under a garden tree. Rudd had frequently tried to speak with him.

But one day, after Teull stopped complaining if Rudd sat next to him, he vanished.

"They search, but they aren't going to find anything. I don't think he had anywhere else to go," Rudd said. Despite the statement, he felt a sense of duty toward Teull. The boy made a displeased face, obviously troubled. "Do you think he could've gone that far even though he's only five? He has magic, I guess. I always thought of him as just a little kid. I still do."

Rudd hadn't initially known that Teull had lost his parents in an accident when his magic went haywire.

"The last time I talked to him was when my mom came to pick me up. I didn't know about his situation, so I asked him if he wanted to have dinner with us, but he said he didn't need any... and he looked super hurt."

By the time Rudd realized how insensitive he'd been, Teull had vanished. He'd gone in the night, and Rudd only found out about the younger boy's circumstances afterward. Aside from realizing how stupid he'd been, Rudd didn't know anything more.

Noticing how low the sun had gotten in the sky, Rudd got up. He had tons of chores to do back home. At first, he'd been awful at them, but he'd since grown relatively competent.

"Okay, I've gotta go home. Don't stay too late, Juliya, or your family will be worried," Rudd said.

"I'll be fine. I just need to stop by the classroom," she replied. The academy gates closed at dusk. Rudd had noticed the groundskeeper making rounds over on the far side of the gardens. If he caught them, he'd tell them to leave because they weren't academy students.

Juliya grinned, and Rudd waved at her and dashed off. In that last glimpse she had of him before he left, she saw that his eyes reflected the shadow of the grand circular academy.

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"Hmm, we really need more clues," Tinasha muttered as she brewed tea. After her lecture, she spoke with a few people to gather information, left the investigation to Pamyra and the other mages, and returned to the palace. She pondered on the case during a break, but found herself stymied.

Tinasha set a cup of tea down on the study desk, and the man who accepted it cast her an appalled look. "You really do just show up whenever you want..."

"Teleportation magic exists. If something happens in Tuldarr, the spirits can notify me."

On her break, Tinasha had popped over to Oscar's study. The king was in the midst of his own royal duties, and while his fiancée's visit stunned him momentarily, he was easygoing enough to welcome the interruption.

Oscar took a sip of the tea. "So there's no lead on the missing kids?"

"Not at all, and the schools only recently started a more serious search. Plus, while some kids claim that they saw the missing ones walking through the town at night, others say they saw nothing at all. The reports we've gotten are all over the place."

"Gotcha. Then you've got two options," Oscar replied.

"Indeed. We either search all over with a fine-tooth comb, or—we wait for the next disappearance to happen and catch them."

The former option was clearly the standard route. Tinasha had already ordered some subjects to the task. But if it didn't turn up anything, she'd pursue the latter choice. When a new kid got targeted, they would set a trap and find out what was really going on.

"However, now that we've launched a full-scale investigation, whoever's behind this might lie low for a while," Tinasha pointed out.

"Or they'll flee to someplace new."

"I'd like to avoid that. I've put up a barrier to prevent those with magic from entering or leaving the town for the moment. If anyone tries to brute force their way through, I'll know."

"So you've effectively caged them in. Does that mean you're sure it's a mage?" Oscar inquired wisely. Tinasha had expected him to pick up on what she'd left unsaid.

Leaning against the wall, the queen grimaced. "Yes, but I don't have any sort of definitive proof. It's just that an ordinary person would have left a trail, but here, there's absolutely nothing."

There was also the fact that only children with magic had gone missing.

Tinasha didn't voice the more unsavory possibilities. She shuddered as she imagined them, and Oscar waved a hand in front of her face. "I get how you feel, but don't overthink it. You're always trying to take everything on alone. Rely on your people."

"Excuse me, were you there?! I don't think you were!" she cried.

"You don't have a leg to stand on here. I know you tried to interview people yourself. You're too intimidating for that kind of work," Oscar pointed out.

Tinasha huffed and pushed herself off the wall. "I've learned from my mistakes when it comes to that!"

Oscar beckoned his fiancée over, and she approached, curious. He caught her hands in his. "Don't do anything dangerous. You're the type to get yourself hurt right away, and I don't want to be on edge for the entire year until our wedding."

"I'll... be careful," she answered as her cheeks flushed and she looked away. Only Oscar could make her so bashful.

Most knew Tinasha as an all-powerful queen, but there was more to her than that.

After a hot exhale, Tinasha shook her head to refresh herself. "I should be getting back. People will probably be delivering their reports to me soon."

"Whenever you need a fun distraction, come and see me."

She grinned at Oscar and disappeared. The king picked up his teacup again. Some minutes later, Lazar entered and gaped at him. "Your Majesty, did you make tea *yourself*?"

"I did not. Tinasha came by."

"I—I see..."

"How come she's never able to calm down?" Oscar wondered.

"I consider that to be a good thing..."

After Tinasha left Farsas, Oscar thought he would only see her once a year from then on. Yet surprisingly, she dropped by as freely as if they were neighbors. While it was always her coming to him via magic, it still felt much easier than he'd imagined.

In general, Farsas's people approved of the king's fiancée, and no one in the castle was shocked at all to find out about their engagement. They had all personally witnessed how well Oscar and Tinasha got along, so while they were a bit surprised, it wasn't unexpected.

Kevin, Oscar's father and the former king, had said of the development, "Good, I'm happy for you. Rosalia would be, too."

For Oscar, who had almost no memories of his mother, hearing her name brought about a fleeting sense of discomfort.

"Lazar, do you remember my mom?" asked Oscar.

"What?! Queen Rosalia? Where'd that come from? I only have a vague recollection of her," Lazar answered.

"Yeah, I thought so. Never mind, it's nothing," Oscar said.

The former queen had fallen ill and died when Oscar was five, and he could barely remember anything from that time. Child kidnappings had been frequent in Farsas then, so he recalled being instructed *never* to go outside. He had absolutely hated that... Why was that the only thing he could remember?

"Should I go and ask Dad about this?" he posited out loud.

The mysterious magic orb in the treasure vault had apparently been his mother's heirloom. When Oscar asked his father about it, Kevin told him that it was all right for Tinasha to seal it away. However, Oscar still didn't understand how a commoner like his mother had come to possess such an extraordinary thing in the first place.

There were multiple questions to ruminate over, but the king set them aside for the time being. He had a pile of more pressing issues to deal with first.

Lazar placed the documents he'd brought in before his liege. The papers outlined the reconstruction progress of the fortress of Ynureid, destroyed during the battle against Druza's forbidden curse.

"It's about sixty percent complete. It sounds like the craftsmen and mages are really working hard," Lazar commented.

"I'll have to give out special rewards once it's done. If we don't restore it soon, Cezar's going to keep acting suspiciously."

The fortress of Ynureid, situated on Farsas's northern border, allowed the country to keep a watchful eye on both Old Druza and Cezar. After the fallout from the forbidden curse incident, Druza split apart, but Cezar had maintained a hostile silence.

Oscar remembered something that Tinasha had mentioned once. "Oh yeah, I heard Cezar has an evil god."

"What in the world is *that*?" Lazar asked, sounding revolted.

"I don't know, either," Oscar replied blithely.

The idea of an evil god was like a sick joke, but perhaps Oscar might face off against it someday. Before mulling over the idea for too long, Oscar set his mind back to his work.

Once Tinasha returned to her study, the first thing she heard was the indignant voice of a young girl. "Like I told you, there's nowhere to hide inside the academy! You should look in the *town*!"

"Yeah, but I was instructed to follow you and look around the school," argued a man.

"All you've done is stalk along behind me! You're treating me like a kid!"

"But you *are* a kid."

The voices were coming from the adjoining room. With a strained smile on her face, Tinasha opened the door. "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting. Please, inform me of what you've uncovered."

"Y-Your Majesty!" chirped the girl, leaping to her feet. Next to her, a beautiful young man simply sighed.

Pamyra, who had kept silent while the other two squabbled, came forward. "Your Majesty, this is Tris. She's an academy student who will begin working as a royal mage next month."

"H-hello, I'm Tris," the girl said, falling into an anxious curtsy.

Tinasha regarded her pleasantly before beckoning all three into her study. "Let's hear your findings, then. Anything you happened to notice is fine."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Tinasha sat down and closed her eyes to focus her attention only on their reports.

The gist of the mages' findings was that the missing children had all wanted to leave the school. Once she'd heard it all, Tinasha opened her eyes and said, "So children who wished to go abruptly vanished. Each was last seen in a different place, but none were spotted outside the town. Is that correct?"

"We also spoke to people in the neighboring settlements and on the nearby road, but no one had any clues to offer. None of the children were capable of teleportation, and the one who's been missing the longest has been gone two weeks," responded Pamyra.

Tinasha nodded. "Very suspicious indeed. Eir, how did things go with you?"

The young man with black hair and eyes, silent until now, scratched at his head. "Most of the people who've been killed were adults, like the headmaster, instructors, and soldiers. There were a few bigger kids, too, but I don't think any of them are suspicious."

"All of that was done in self-defense, or it happened as an accident before they enrolled at the academy. We've looked into that already," Pamyra added calmly.

Tris, the only one who wasn't following, paled. "What?! What do you mean killed people?"

"I can sense those who've slain others. That's why I've been following you around," answered Eir.

"Can an ordinary mage do something like that?!" Tris squeaked.

"He's not an ordinary mage," Tinasha put in. "He's my spirit and a high-ranking demon."

"What?" Tris said blankly, positively boggling at this. Eir rolled his eyes at her.

Ancient literature spoke of high-ranking demons' ability to sniff out murderers, something that was impossible for any human mage. It counted as a sort of demon-specific quality. High-ranking demons, who generally lived on a different plane of existence, could use smell to discern humans who had killed others.

Whether the murder was done by magic or by sword didn't matter. According to the demons, the moment of directly killing a person placed an indelible stain on the soul, altering it irrevocably.

Perhaps this stemmed from the same principle that made spirit sorcerers' power so closely linked to their chastity. A spirit sorcerer who lost their magic upon forging a link to the next generation and a person who took another's life both underwent an invisible alteration.

Seeing how blindsided Tris was, Tinasha nervously licked her lips. "I'm sorry for keeping you in the dark. Aside from his beautiful face, Eir can pass for human, so I thought he would be more convincing if you didn't know."

"My lady, you always give me orders I don't understand," remarked Eir.

"The most important thing is not to be too conspicuous. If only you'd change your face to be more ordinary." Tinasha sighed.

"I can't change it. This is how I've looked for nine hundred years," Eir said stubbornly.

Tris, who evidently had thought of him as just some shady guy, was opening and closing her mouth like a beached fish.

Pamyra, however, who had known he was a spirit, wore a grave expression as she asked her queen, "Do you believe the children are already dead, Your Majesty?"

"I don't want to, but it's hard to stay optimistic considering the situation," Tinasha answered. "Based on the fact that only children with magic disappeared, we should suspect the involvement of a forbidden curse."

"A forbidden... curse?" repeated Pamyra.

"The physical flesh and souls of those with magic are far more powerful as catalysts in a forbidden curse than those of non-mages. And if they're only children, they would have a much harder time fighting back. It gives me a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach," said Tinasha.

Oscar had likely considered the possibility that the children were already dead, too. He just hadn't voiced it, out of consideration for his fiancée. But it wasn't like Tinasha couldn't handle that. She had witnessed far grimmer things in her life.

The queen straightened to her full height and narrowed her dark eyes at each of the three. In a cold voice, she said, "Tuldarr must act as a deterrent to forbidden curses. If this does turn out to be a plot, we will deliver swift punishment. I want you to carry on with the investigation. Should you run into a dead end, I will go myself."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Pamyra said with a deep bow. Following her example, Tris also clasped her sweaty hands together.

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The gates of the academy came into view. The town children were streaming in for morning lessons, but something was different. A guard was posted at the entrance, sent from the castle. The academy had never had soldiers before, and the children stopped and stared.

Rudd glanced up at the woman next to him. "Here is good, Mom."

"Really? Are you going to be all right?" she asked, fretting.

"I told you, it'll be fine. I'm off to school now," Rudd said, waving at her and running off. As soon as he passed the gates, he spotted his friends and waved. "Juliya! Sennett!"

Hearing their names, the two paused in their conversation to turn around. Rudd fell into step with them and lowered his voice. "There's some sort of guard here now. Is that because kids are going missing?"

"Looks like it. Doesn't have anything to do with us, though," Sennett, a boy around Rudd's age, replied. He loved reading, and the first thing he did after listening to the queen speak the day before was dash off to the library as fast as his legs could carry him.

Juliya looked from one boy to the other nervously. "What if the kids who disappeared are all being held prisoner somewhere?"

"If it's someplace that could hold all five, I bet it's an empty house or something. You know, like that one in the alley behind the blacksmith," said Sennett.

"Should we... go looking for them?" Rudd offered.

He did want to uncover the truth, both out of a sense of guilt toward Teull and out of a sense of duty. His mom must be worried, since she'd insisted on walking him to school every day after the first kid had vanished. She always stood to the side and watched until Rudd went through the gates.

He didn't want to make his mother worry anymore. Plus, from now on, Tuldarr would need the help of people like him, people who weren't mages.

"Okay, then once school's over—"

"*What* is going on here?" came a chilly voice from behind them.

The three kids stiffened, then slowly turned around.

"T-Tris..."

"That's Madame to you. I'm your teacher," chided the girl, one hand laid across her puffed-out chest. Tris was one of the academy students who

worked as their instructor. She scolded them often but looked after them well. And yet, for a teacher, she had a tendency to be thoughtless and rash.

Rudd cocked his head. "Madame, I thought you weren't giving lessons anymore, since you're going to be a royal mage."

"I'm here to investigate, so none of you have classes today! You can study on your own, though," Tris replied.

"What? Then I'm going home," Rudd said, turning on his heel to leave and maybe go snoop around that deserted house.

Tris caught him immediately, however. "Absolutely not. If anyone finds out that you three snuck off to go poking around somewhere, it'll be my head. You are going to remain here and study."

"Why do I have to?!" Rudd protested as Tris dragged him to the classroom.

Amid the flow of other kids turning to go home after getting to the schoolhouse and reading the notice that said lessons were canceled, Tris marched the three into the empty classroom and sat them down.

She sighed and then stretched her arms out. "I'm going to head out on the investigation, so you sit tight and study here until I return. I only came to tell you that lessons are canceled."

"Aww, come *on*! You're already going to look around, so what's a few more people?" Rudd groaned.

"No, thank you. We already have one very strange person on the team who claims he can tell who might have done it at a glance. Yesterday, he examined the people in the school, and today we're going to look around town," Tris said primly.

"Whoa, that's so cool. You'll solve this superfast that way," Rudd marveled, leaning forward with how impressed he was. Castle investigations were definitely on another level.

Tris folded her arms behind her head. "Not necessarily. If that were the case, it could be the teachers or a soldier who did it."

"Huh. When you say a soldier, do you mean like the one at the gates today?" Rudd asked.

Tris was stunned. Typically, there were no guards at the academy. Her face turned grave. "Now that you mention it... There was no soldier here yesterday. Who did he check, then?"

She got up and gave the kids one of the sternest looks they'd ever seen. "All of you stay *right* here. I have something to take care of."

"Hey! Where are you going?" Rudd called, chasing after Tris as she left the classroom.

Sennett followed after. "Could it have been the groundskeeper? I heard he used to be part of the army."

"Oh, yeah!" Rudd exclaimed. He'd heard that rumor, too.

Tris appeared confused. Academy students seldom interacted with the groundskeeper, who handled various odd jobs outside.

"I heard the groundskeeper only worked at the army canteen, though," Rudd added. He and his friends had followed Tris out of the school building. There weren't any other kids around, but the groundskeeper was walking across the lawn on the far side of the garden, dragging a large burlap sack.

Tris gasped. As she strode toward the man, she looked over her shoulder and instructed, "You three, run along home! I'm going to go ask him some questions."

She trotted over briskly but stealthily. Rudd, Sennet, and Juliya exchanged glances. Rudd whispered to the others, "We can't let her go alone."

At the very least, someone needed to sound the alarm if something happened. The trio nodded and hurried after their teacher. She gave them a disapproving look, but she couldn't say anything without alerting the man.

The groundskeeper lugged the sack toward a gap in the circular academy building.

"Tris, where does that lead?"

"To... the space the school surrounds."

The octagonal classrooms had no windows facing inward, and the spot in the center should have been empty. That was why the investigation team had only given it a cursory inspection. What could the man be doing there?

The four crept along the wall so as not to be detected. Once the groundskeeper reached the unmonitored central area, he dumped the bag's contents.

Black terra-cotta soil came spilling out. He began spreading it around using something that looked like a fireplace poker.

Relief washed over Rudd when he saw it wasn't a child's body, but all the blood drained from Tris's face. She gestured wildly for the children to leave, but before they could, the groundskeeper turned around.

Upon noticing them there, his face instantly contorted into a scowl. He was a mere ten steps away. Tris shoved Rudd behind her. "You guys get out of here."

"What? But it's just some dirt..."

"Dirt oozing with miasma. It's definitely sinister. Run and let someone know," ordered Tris in a tone that held none of her usual flippancy. Rudd was startled to hear her muttering a spell.

The man ran toward them with the poker brandished high overhead, and Rudd darted off with his friends.

"W-we'll go let people know! Don't die, Madame!"

Magic light burst behind him. A paralyzing metallic sound rent the air.

Rudd took Juliya's hand while Sennett kept pace with him. The gardens had never seemed so empty.

The academy doors came into view. But because lessons were canceled, they were locked.

"Damn!"

How could they get inside? Rudd looked all around before remembering the guard at the gates. He dashed across the deserted front lawn, Sennett hot on his heels.

Juliya had disappeared at some point, though neither of them noticed.

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The fireplace poker crashed into the wall with an earsplitting screech. Tris shuddered, having narrowly evaded it. She probably wouldn't still be conscious if it had hit her. She quickly distanced herself from the groundskeeper as she restarted her interrupted spell.

"S-stones of ice, shards of white—"

The man lashed out before she could complete the magic, however. The poker came crashing down, and she instinctively shut her eyes. Her blood ran cold as death felt imminent.

But nothing hit her skull. Gingerly, she opened her eyes—and couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"Juliya?"

The girl who had hidden behind Rudd now stood before Tris, her arms crossed and a fierce glare on her face. The poker had stopped in midair—no, magic had caught it. Tris hadn't heard any incantation, however. Juliya wasn't even an academy student; she was just a girl from the town.

Tris still hadn't figured out what was happening when Juliya said to her, "It's suicide for a mage to fight at such close range."

The coolheaded remark felt at odds with the childish register of her voice. Juliya extended her right hand toward the man. *"Break apart."*

As if it knew that those two words constituted a spell, the poker crumbled to pieces.

Heedless of Tris, who was still rooted in place, Juliya waved a hand. "Eir, come here."

In response, the strange man appeared silently beside Tris. He pushed her by the shoulder. "Go on, fall back. I took my eyes off you for a second, and you landed yourself in a heap of trouble."

"Wh-why are you...?"

As she stumbled, Tris realized something. Only one person could command the spirits of Tuldarr. Once she understood what that meant, she was left astonished. "Wait, you're..."

Juliya's silhouette wavered for just a moment, and then she was no longer there. In her place stood a woman in a white mage's outfit. It was the queen of the country and the foremost mage of the era. She was not a powerless child. Dumbfounded that she had fallen for it, Tris massaged her temples. "What? Psychological magic? But when did you...?"

"Juliya was a fabrication from the start," Tinasha explained. Then she turned back to the man. Frozen while brandishing his poker, he was glaring at the queen with bloodshot eyes.

"Will you tell me what you were dumping here?" she questioned.

The man only let out a grunt.

Tinasha turned to her spirit. "He may be suffering from psychological contamination. Have him spit it out."

"It'll be hard not to overdo it. Humans are *so* weak," complained Eir, which Tinasha ignored as she pushed the man aside to head deeper into the area encircled by the academy building.

The black soil scattered around emanated faintly noxious fumes. It was the putrid smell of lingering death.

Still, there were no bodies. The groundskeeper might have already disposed of those. Tinasha gazed up at the sky. "Did he only bring the remains of the catalysts he used in a forbidden curse? Was he planning to reuse this corrupted soil? He'd definitely want to bury something connected to anything that sinister, and this architecture is designed to bolster magic."

"Your Majesty!" cried Pamyra, having appeared at the end of the passage to the central area as several people raced over. Rudd must have summoned help. Tris finally lost the strength to stand upright and sank to the ground. Soldiers marched past her.

Tinasha made no effort to hide her displeasure as she issued orders. "Go and search the town immediately. Since we didn't find anything during yesterday's investigation, there must be a forbidden curse constructed somewhere outside the school. And... we're also looking for the mage who's behind this."

"What?!" Tris piped up in shock. Pamyra's expression indicated that she felt much the same.

The only one left unperturbed was the spirit. Eir had a tight grip on the groundskeeper's neck as he added, "They used a forbidden curse, but this man isn't a mage. So someone else must be involved."

"Involved? But... do you mean the teachers?" asked Tris.

Was one of the instructors the culprit? Many of them were talented mages with battle experience, which is why it wasn't surprising when Eir discovered that the headmaster and several teachers had killed people. But did that mean they had slain students?

The queen shook her head. "No. We looked into all of them. I suppose they could've had others do the dirty work for them, though. We're up against a very cunning opponent."

"No way," Tris whispered, stiffening in horror.

Suddenly, there came the muffled sound of an explosion in the distance. Tremors shook the earth and a creaking sound reverberated in the air.

Tinasha frowned. "I see they've come out on their own."

After giving terse orders to the people around her, the queen vanished. Tris looked down at her own hands.

They were trembling uncontrollably.

"Come quick! Our teacher is in danger!" Rudd shouted toward the gates. Mages from the castle were already there. They listened to him hastily explain before rushing off toward the academy. Rudd and Sennett tried to follow, but the guard stopped them. He pushed them outside the gate and instructed them to go home.

"What in the world did we just see?" asked Sennett.

"Beats me. When I watched him pour that dirt out, I could feel how scared Madame got. But it *did* smell really weird," said Rudd.

The more they talked about it, the less sense it made and the scarier it seemed. Just as Rudd decided he needed to make sure Tris was all right, a woman ran over from the end of the road.

"Rudd! What happened to you?!"

"Mom!" Rudd was at a loss for how to explain things to his distraught parent.

Before he could start, she pulled him into a hug. "I heard investigators from the castle are here. What's happened at the school?"

"Right now, a teacher and the groundskeeper are—"

He got that far before a strange malaise came over him. He wriggled out of his mother's arms and looked over at Sennett. "Hey... Wasn't someone else with us?"

"Oh, yeah..."

Rudd had the oddest sense that he'd grabbed someone's hand and had run with them. But that person had disappeared somewhere along the way. Now that he was aware, it felt wrong.

Rudd turned pale. "Why...?"

A kid who vanished into thin air... Was that what had happened to Teull?

As she watched her son go completely pale, Rudd's mother gave a pained smile. "Let's go home first. We need to think about what we're going to do next."

Stunned, Rudd let her pull him along. Who had disappeared? A series of memories floated from the back of his mind.

"I... But why...?"

There was a gap in his recollection. It gave him this itchy, unpleasant sensation, and it was only growing—like the gap was constantly widening. Rudd pressed a hand to his head. He looked over to his friend for help, but Sennett wasn't next to him. "Huh?"

He whirled around to find Sennett standing motionless a few steps behind him. Rudd was relieved to see he hadn't disappeared, but then noticed Sennett's dire expression.

"What's wrong?"

Sennett lifted a trembling hand and pointed a finger at Rudd. "Who are you?"

"Huh? What's gotten into you? It's me," Rudd answered.

"No." What was Sennett saying? Had he forgotten Rudd just like how they had forgotten the other person who'd been with them? "*Who is that?*"

Rudd had a feeling someone had said those words recently. It was when he last saw Teull.

It was twilight, the time of day when people's faces got a little hazy. Teull had looked up at Rudd and asked him that same question.

"Wait, huh?"

No. Teull hadn't been looking at him. His eyes had been trained on the woman behind Rudd.

And now Sennett was also pointing at...

"Didn't you say that your mom went to your aunt's house two weeks ago?" Sennett asked. The woman placed a palm on Rudd's shoulder. "So who is that?"

From the corner of his eye, Rudd saw a hand that was white and bloodless.

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The explosion came from the town, outside the academy grounds.

While everyone else was still baffled by the situation, the queen lifted off the ground. "Eir, make sure no one gets in. Pamyra and Tris, protect the students!"

"Okay," answered the spirit, the only calm one there, though Tinasha had already disappeared.

Teleporting in quick succession, Tinasha hurried toward the source of the blast, a deserted back alley. Magic hung thick in the air, dim as the little street was in the shadow of other buildings.

The smell of blood hung about the place. Tinasha spotted two boys collapsed on the ground, and she paled. A woman was standing beside them. She was young and plainly dressed, like any lady in the town might've been. But blood dripped from her hands.

When she noticed Tinasha, she smiled and giggled like a child who'd been discovered pulling a prank. "Oops, did you catch me?"

Tinasha didn't reply. She walked up to one of the boys and examined his injuries.

Sennett's chest was pierced through. He was dead.

Fear was frozen on his face—the despair he had tasted moments before dying. Tinasha bit her lip hard enough for it to bleed.

Next to her, a voice croaked, "Your... Your Majesty?"

"Rudd!"

Crimson was flowing from Rudd's belly. Tinasha gasped when she saw how much blood soaked the ground below them, but she immediately set about healing him. She added a pain numbing spell, too.

Once freed from the agony, the boy relaxed his brows. "I'm sorry... I... I didn't realize... that wasn't... my mom..."

"You don't need to speak. It's all right."

"Teull... he was with me, that's why... she found him... because she came to get me..."

Sensing his end was near, Rudd was intent on explaining everything. By the time Tinasha found him, he'd lost too much blood. Mending his organs wouldn't suffice.

Even so, she healed him. Rudd clutched the edge of her robes. His eyes were unfocused and darted about as he sought out the queen. "Your Majesty... save Sennett..."

"I will."

"And my mom..."

His words cut off there. Tinasha watched as the light faded from his eyes in a single second.

From above, a curious-sounding voice spoke. "Who *are* you, anyway? A teacher? A castle investigator?"

Tinasha didn't bother with a reply, remaining kneeling on the ground.

The woman huffed at being ignored, then turned on her heel. "Fine. I'm going. There's nothing left for me in this town."

"I can't let you do that," Tinasha stated. No sooner did she finish than the woman who had posed as Rudd's mother was flung into the air. She slammed against the far wall as if punched by a giant invisible fist.

"Ghh... Hah..."

She groaned in pain, but was still alive, perhaps because she'd quickly put up a defense.

While the woman peeled herself from the wall, Tinasha closed the two boys' eyelids. Summoning two white cloths into her hands, she lay them over their faces.

Upon seeing this act of reverence for the departed, the woman spat a mixture of blood and saliva on the ground. "What a worthless courtesy. They're already dead. Their souls are gone."

"That may be true. But it matters to their families," Tinasha replied, brushing her long black hair back as she got to her feet. She stared straight at the woman, with murder blazing in her gaze.

"So you took the place of adults who were out of town. And without entering the academy grounds, you sent in your pawn and had children abducted. Why?" Tinasha's voice was low and commanding.

The woman seemed confused. "*Why?* To get more power, of course. Don't you know that if you use a mage's flesh as a catalyst, you can get more magic?"

"I'm aware. Many experimented with that during the Dark Age."

"Exactly. I've always wanted to be a witch, and once I am one, I can live freely forever, right? So I collected some mage corpses, but it looks like I overdid it a little. There's a barrier up, and I can't leave town."

"That's because I believed it very likely that a mage was behind this," Tinasha said.

"But it's not like *I'm* the one who killed those kids."

"You may as well have. And you've murdered these two," Tinasha pointed out.

The woman gave a deep, exaggerated sigh. "I only wanted to take them hostage. But they figured out who I am and resisted. Honestly, ordinary people die so easily, don't they?"

She spread both bloodstained hands wide and gave a carefree laugh. The cruelty in her eyes made them glitter as brightly as an ornament, transforming her from a mother to an ignorant little girl. She had only been able to hide herself this whole time because Rudd had no magic.

Despite that, the boy must have felt something was suspicious. And so he had died with regrets.

Tinasha let out a deep exhale. She fixed her gaze on this red-stained woman. A bone-chilling smile appeared on her lovely face, and a blade formed in her right hand.

"Perhaps you will find more sport in me, then. May your future be one of endless remorse."

With that proclamation, the queen dashed forward. When the woman saw the fearsome magic gathering in Tinasha's left hand, she licked her lips nervously.

Enormous waves of magic erupted within the town.

There was no spell configuration to be seen. Such was the massive difference in the two mages' power levels. Lashed by Tinasha's invisible whip, the woman flew through the air.

"Guh..."

For a while now, she had been unable to weave spells to counterattack. Although her powers far surpassed those of an ordinary mage, she was helpless to do anything against this opponent.

As the woman's body soared upward, magical chains immobilized it. Her limbs were pulled far apart, keeping her from moving a millimeter. She stared at Tinasha in disbelief.

"Witches are nothing like this," Tinasha spat. "Aren't you glad you won't sully their reputation?"

"W-wait a minute..."

"I can't possibly have such a sham of a witch in Tuldarr."

"The boy called you 'Your Majesty'... Are you... the queen?"

Tinasha didn't reply, electing to only hum and smile.

The queen pointed the tip of her slender sword at the woman. The weapon was enchanted with an entangling spell.

"You are not qualified to question me."

With a clear ringing, the blade shattered to pieces. Those little shards glittered in the sun. Each one was imbued with magic and floated aloft.

The corners of Tinasha's mouth turned up. Powerful words fell from her red lips.

"Sip it up."

The tiny metal pieces fell onto the woman's body like a meteor shower. They tore into her white skin and sent her blood running out.

It must have felt like being stabbed by thousands of nails. The woman's mouth opened as though to scream, but all the holes in her neck stifled whatever noise would have come. She could only wheeze ragged breaths.

Her death lasted several slow, agonizing minutes. She was not even permitted to lose consciousness. Although she writhed desperately at first, she eventually began to weaken, and she breathed her last as a broken doll. Tinasha watched coldly until the end.

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The conclusion was hardly satisfying.

A later search uncovered traces of the missing children that led to an old storehouse in town. There was also clear evidence of a forbidden curse. The poor corpses of the kids no longer resembled human bodies. The dirt the groundskeeper had brought into the academy was stained with their blood, and it was seemingly meant to draw suspicion to the faculty. It could also have been meant to create a forbidden curse site. The exact purpose died with the woman responsible, and knowing wouldn't have provided any relief.

While extra staff from the castle ran about handling the aftermath, Tinasha attended the deliveries of the two boys' bodies to their families. Sennett's parents flew into a rage, raining abuse down on the headmaster and the castle staff, who could only endure it with their heads lowered.

But what tormented Tinasha more was the sight of Rudd's mother, who had recently returned from her visit to another town.

"What...? This can't be... There's no way..."

Her face was white, but she didn't cry or scream. She only stood there stunned before her son's body, smiling weakly. When she tore off the white cloth, her lips trembled violently. "Is it really you...?"

The corpse had been purified and cleaned, so Rudd only appeared to be sleeping.

His mother reached out for her son. She brushed her cheek against his cold one and carefully took him into her arms. Her feeble voice staggered in the night air. "You weren't supposed to leave me behind... You should have taken me with you!"

No one knew what to say in the face of such bitter anguish.

Tinasha pressed her hands to her temples to keep herself from crying.

The mother who had lost her only child began to wail and sob. "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, Rudd... You must have been in so much pain..."

He would never move again. His soul, mind, and very existence were all gone, and it wasn't fair. The boy was kind, the type to be considerate of the sickly little girl who had been his friend since childhood. He was so brave,

he refused to ignore the kidnappings. Tinasha bit her lip hard and bowed her head.

"I wasn't strong enough to save your sons. I'm so very sorry."

When Sennett's parents heard that apology, it took away any outlet for their anger and left them speechless. Tinasha's attendants glanced at her, unsure of how to proceed.

All told, seven children had been sacrificed.

Of all the forbidden curses that had tormented the country, this one would leave deep scars.

Rudd's mother beheld the queen's lowered head and replied, "It isn't your fault, Your Majesty... I am deeply grateful to you... for caring for him."

Rudd's smile flashed through Tinasha's mind. Bursting with pride, he'd wanted to make his mother happy and be of use to his country. Yet his hopes and future were lost forever. Parent and child had cared so deeply for one another, but the mother was on her own now.

Tinasha kept her head down. Renart gave her a gentle nudge. "Your Majesty, we still have much to take care of..."

"Yes, of course..."

The queen still desperately wished to do more, but she gave one final bow and turned to leave. From behind, she heard Rudd's mother whisper, "If only I could turn back time and go in his place..."

The queen shivered. Finding it odd, Renart looked over at her only to see her dark eyes wider than they'd ever been and her red lips trembling. "Your Majesty?"

Tinasha didn't respond, however. When he tried again, she met his gaze.

What Renart saw in the queen's eyes struck him dumb.

Whether it was determination or fear was hard to judge. Nevertheless, it was something powerful.

"Could I have you take care of the rest? I'm going back to the palace," she said.

Despite feeling puzzled by her behavior, Renart let none of his hesitations show as he bowed his head. "Yes, Your Majesty. Be careful."

"Thank you."

And then she was gone.

Renart surveyed the panicked town and the bereaved family members before letting out a deep sigh.

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Once back at the palace, Tinasha stumbled her way to the treasure vault. Ordering the confused-looking guards to stay at their posts, she descended the stairs alone.

With each step she took down the magically lit stone stairway, the weight on her heart grew stronger. Memories of when she was a young girl sprang to mind unbidden.

Soon enough, however, Tinasha reached the bottom of the stairs. Entering the treasure vault for the first time in four centuries, she wandered in deeper, like a woman possessed. Upon reaching a giant stone ledge, she touched the wall next to it. A spell configuration emerged from beneath her fingertips. It was intricate sealing magic she had placed during the Dark Age. She glanced at it, then began an incantation in an even voice. The complex spell reacted to the power entering it and began to unwind.

Her voice was grave, with all emotions stifled.

Once her long incantation finished at last, a small hollow opened in the center of the wall. Set inside it was a box.

Tinasha reached out, picked it up, and gently opened the lid. Inside lay a tiny blue jewel with markings inscribed upon it.

"Here it is," she said, her heart pounding and her hands trembling. She stared at it.

This orb had changed her fate, and not hers alone. It had transformed another man's fate and many other things, too.

She had thought she'd never look upon it again, that the day would never come when she needed it.

But now it lay here, in her hands.

"If I go back one month, I can save everyone... Or if that's impossible, then I can go a few hours back..."

Altering the past was wrong. It flew in the face of the laws of nature. The ramifications were unfathomable.

Yet that very power had rescued her. It was the reason she was here now.

Tinasha thought of Rudd's grin as he spoke of his hopes for the future—as well as his mother's crying.

A parent's wish was to save her son's life, even at the cost of her own. Tinasha felt powerless to deny the woman that.

"I wonder what Oscar would say..."

She couldn't imagine it. He might furiously scold her, but he also might shake his head and forgive her.

And... what would *he* say?

The man who went back four hundred years and changed history.

How determined was he to do what he did? Did he take her hand?

Tinasha's eyes burned hot as she thought of what *he* had given her and what he had sacrificed. She bit her lip fiercely to stem the tide of emotions surging within her.

Compared to four hundred years, it was only a little bit of time travel.

It was hypocritical, Tinasha knew that much. She was doing this out of a self-serving sense of complacency. Countless people had died at her hands, and they'd all had families. She was well aware that she reeked of murder more than anyone else did.

But even so.

Tinasha squeezed her eyes shut.

Fear and hesitation rushed through her mind. Whether it lasted for seconds or hours was unclear.

And though she was still undecided, she slowly stretched out a finger.

She would not cast off her fear, or her shivering, or her trepidation, or her hope.

Those were all hers. She carried them inside her and stood upon them.

"It's all right."

From deep within the hesitation in her mind, she let out a heavy sigh.

And then she finally reached for the orb, thinking of the man who had been all alone.



Moonlight filtered weakly into the dark room.

Oscar, who had just finished changing for bed, noticed the fading light and looked up. Pale clouds now blanketed the sky, limned at the edges with a hazy glimmer. He then returned his attention to the inside of the room.

The king's expansive bedchamber was utterly silent. As Oscar sat on his bed with a little yawn, he heard a rap at the window and grinned. At his call, he'd gotten the reply he'd expected.

The woman stole silently into the room. She cocked her head at him and then smiled. "Good evening."

"Something wrong? You're here awfully late."

"I just wanted to see you..."

His beautiful fiancée picked her way over to him, each step careful. As he watched her, he began to frown. "Did something happen?"

"No, nothing."

"That's not a face that says nothing happened."

He took her hand and pulled her onto his lap. The woman seemed a bit surprised, but merely lowered her long eyelashes with an abashed little grin on her lips. After a brief silence, she asked, "Oscar... what happened to that orb?"

It was obvious what she was referring to, and he gave a concise response. "I found it when I was sorting through the treasure vault. It's stored deep inside so no one can touch it."

"I see..."

"What happened? Does this have to do with the kidnappings?"

Tinasha only gave a small smile, but she didn't answer.

Seeing that she was acting stubborn, Oscar wound a tuft of glossy black hair between his fingers and gave a hard tug. "You're being awfully secretive. I'm going to be your husband, aren't I? Don't hold back and just tell me."

At that, Tinasha's eyes shone with something like nostalgia. She pinched the bridge of her nose with a deep sigh.

Thinking that she was holding back tears, Oscar settled Tinasha's head against his chest, and she closed her eyes.

With the queen nestled in her fiancé's arms, the story gradually began to come out.

As her tale neared its end, Oscar threw his betrothed an unvarnished look of disapproval. "You gave me such an earful about that orb and then you went and used it yourself?"

"I'm sorry..."

"And even though I told you not to get involved, you turned into a kid and went undercover. What were you thinking?"

"I thought it would be the fastest way..."

This woman really was intractable. Oscar had known that since meeting her, but this was still an unbelievable development.

It all stemmed from how deep her emotions ran. Oscar gave Tinasha's head a light rap. "I understand that you wanted to save those kids, but if you do that every time, there'll be no end to it. You'll never get anywhere."

Tinasha hung her head. She'd known the things Oscar was saying from the start.

Oscar gave a little sigh, seeing her so full of regret and some other emotion that was about more than remorse. "Although... I can't say I dislike that side of you or anything."

This delicate young woman was so weak and yet so strong. Looking at her, Oscar got the sense that it was only a matter of perspective whether Tinasha's traits were flaws or assets; the essence within was practically the same.

By nature, she was someone who wanted to honor people's wishes and feelings. Yet as a queen, she needed to maintain a considerable degree of coolheadedness. Tinasha was always warring with the contradictions within herself. And those in the midst of battle did feel momentary twinges of guilt over their actions.

The sorrowful look on his betrothed's face sent Oscar into a reverie. What if she had been born into an ordinary family and had grown up without such an overabundance of magic? Maybe she would have lived a happy and fulfilled life as a good wife and mother. However, from her earliest moments, she never had such an option, and so she had chosen to go to war with herself.

Oscar brushed Tinasha's hair behind her ear and pressed a kiss to her cheek, which reddened. "So? Could you save them?"

The way he asked was like he never doubted that Tinasha would succeed, and her heart ached. She slumped in visible dejection. "The orb didn't activate. I couldn't go back in time."

"It didn't activate? Is it broken?"

"No... It didn't seem that way... It seems like there are conditions of some sort that must be met before it can be used."

Her story was over. Tinasha closed her eyes.

Oscar clutched her slender, grief-racked frame close to him.

Her own experience of getting rescued because of time travel must have been affecting her. The one who saved her had vanished. Left alone, all she could do was live her life with her gratitude and everything else she felt for him locked inside herself. No matter how deep those scars ran, someone like Oscar, who hadn't shared her past with her, couldn't remove them.

It was all he could do to support her. He had long ago decided to stay with her and never let her go.

So if that path had led her to his own, perhaps that counted as something blessed.

Suddenly, Oscar noticed that the supple body in his arms had grown heavy, though not truly. He was simply feeling Tinasha's full body weight that normally she lightened with magic.

Curious, Oscar peered over at Tinasha's downturned face. She had passed out, a little crease of sadness above her nose.

"Y-you're *asleep*?" he whispered, feeling more worn out than exasperated. He managed to maneuver her limp frame onto the bed and lay her flat.

Whether she'd exhausted herself after being so constantly on edge, or whether she was simply a naturally deep sleeper, Tinasha displayed no signs of waking. Oscar sighed, eyeing her in that vulnerable state. He reached out to smooth the wrinkle in her brow. Now her face carried a modicum of tranquility. Gazing at it, Oscar muttered, "I really don't know what to do with you."

He very much wanted to tug at Tinasha's cheeks for how defenselessly she slept, but he restrained himself.

Oscar lay down to rest next to her, carding his fingers through black strands. The glossy, smooth sensation was a truly alluring thing. He wanted to touch her soft skin but satisfied himself with petting her hair. When he was done, he pulled the covers over her.

The soft, even sounds of Tinasha's breathing filled the room, relaxing Oscar as he closed his own eyes. He hoped that she could find peaceful dreams in his bed. Hopefully, peace would come to feel like something natural for her. Oscar vowed to keep Tinasha safe, so that it would be possible.

He caught hold of her tiny hand, and the feel of it sent him drifting off into a dream.

■ 6. Bloodless Scars

Morning light prickled at her eyes. The breeze coming in from the open window stirred her long black hair.

Such brightness was wholly unwelcome. Instinctively, she curled up and pulled the pillow over her face. She tried to fall back to sleep, but someone tapped lightly at the back of her head.

“Wake up, Tinasha.”

She heard him speak but couldn’t comprehend the words. Resisting, she shook her head underneath the pillow.

Heartlessly, he kept going. “Wake up, wake up. You’re terrible at getting out of bed in the morning.”

He grabbed her arms and pulled her upright, but she quickly flopped back down before he could keep her in place.

He eyed her prostrate form with dismay. Sighing, he hoisted her up into his arms. “I’m going to toss you into the bathtub.”

“Ugh...” Her dark eyes blinked open.

“You better not go back to sleep, got it? I’ll pinch you if you do.”

“Mm-kay... Morning, Oscar.”

“Every day you test my patience, I swear.” The words were harsh, but inside them was a deep and abiding affection.

She gave an absentminded smile. With her arms wrapped around his neck, she slowly slid down until she was standing. After a pause, she yawned. Blue sky could be seen through the window.

“Nice weather today,” she commented.

“Do you want me to take you out somewhere? I’ve got Nark, so it wouldn’t require much time.”

Her eyes grew wide. Hope blossomed inside her heart.

She was quick to squelch it, however. “There’ll be trouble if anyone finds out I’m gone. But thank you.”

“You’re still a kid. You should get to take a break,” he argued, stroking her hair. Her eyes went half-lidded like a cat’s as she grinned.

When she opened her eyes, the room was already light. Tinasha pulled away the arm she'd flung over her face.

Didn't she already get up? For some reason, she was in bed again. Though her body was sluggish to respond, she managed to drag herself upright. Someone asked calmly, "You up?"

Tinasha looked over to see a man getting changed, facing away from the bed. She recognized the broad stretch of his back.

Sleepily, she replied, "Mm-hmm. Good morning. I'll go make breakfast..."

"What?" he questioned sharply, turning back to look at her.

She blinked at him in confusion, her head tilted to one side. "What's wrong, Oscar?"

"What's wrong with *you*?"

"Huh?" Tinasha shook her sleep-addled head. Looking around, she saw that she wasn't in her room.

Glancing down at herself, she noticed that her body wasn't the skinny frame of a teenage girl. She had soft, womanly curves.

She looked back over at the man who had paused mid-dressing, his arms through his shirt. Abruptly, her memories returned. "Oh... I—I think I was just half asleep. Sorry."

"Wake all the way up. You're so bad with mornings."

Tinasha gave her flushed cheeks a light slap. She had confused a dream from her younger days with reality. The rooms she lived in then no longer existed. She was in the king of Farsas's bedchamber.

Looking down at herself again, she realized she was wearing the same clothes as she had the day before. "Did I fall asleep here?"

"You went out like a light. You're a champion sleeper and yet so very, very bad at getting up. How long did you plan on staying in bed?" Oscar chided.

"Urgh... I'm sorry..."

Tinasha swung her legs over the side of the bed to sit on the edge of the mattress. She glanced at the clock and paled. "I—I'm going to be late... I have a meeting..."

"I thought you might. That's why I tried to wake you, but you completely refused," Oscar replied. He was now fully dressed, and he tossed her a teasing smirk.

Tinasha shrunk in on herself like a scolded child.

Even home in Tuldarr, she was a poor riser. Often, she only just barely managed to drag herself to the bath in the morning. While her ladies-in-waiting all knew she was like this, almost no one else did.

If Tinasha hurried, there was still a chance she wouldn't be late.

"Sorry, I need to get back now," she said with an apologetic nod.

"Mm-hmm," answered Oscar, flapping a hand at her. She flashed him a soft smile and summarily vanished from the room.

Oscar shook his head at his fiancée, gone so abruptly.

Had that been a good distraction for her? At the very least, she had seemed her usual self when she'd grinned.

Eyeing the clock, Oscar realized that he was an hour late, because he'd been dealing with Tinasha.

Although he should've been in a rush, too, he couldn't help but focus on what Tinasha had said when she was still half awake.

"What kind of food could she even make? Terrifying," he muttered with a smirk as he headed out to begin his work for the day.

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The stone chamber was so enormous it could house a mansion. The walls and ceiling were bare excavated rock, while the interior was cold as ice.

It wasn't naturally frigid, however. Strange waves of bitter air kept rolling in from a gigantic hole in the center of the room.

Valt stood on the edge of it, peering down. It was boundlessly deep, the bottom impossible to make out. But if he strained his eyes, he could see something slithering in the darkness.

Whatever it was emanated pure evil.

"Valt, isn't it time yet? If we leave it there much longer, it's going to eat all," someone said, and Valt turned to see a dozen men standing along the wall, clearly unwilling to get as close to the aperture as he was. It had been one of them who complained.

Valt gave a shrug. "True enough. I suppose we can begin."

The men stirred. Every time one of them had suggested something like that to him previously, he'd shot the suggestion down. Sensing their morale surging like a wave, Valt gave a strained smile. "I will handle it until it's set outside. No one else can, after all. Aside from that, do as you like. I won't attempt to control it."

"That's fine. We'll handle it," one man stated confidently.

Internally, Valt sneered. The men were far too dazzled by the sheer power to judge whether they were actually capable of wielding it.

But very soon, they would all learn firsthand what it was like to hold too much strength.

Valt could have warned them but saw no reason to. His desires lay elsewhere.

It had taken meticulous planning and execution of work laid by generations before him to reach this turning point.

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After Tinasha's meeting, which she barely arrived to on time, she had lunch with Legis. The conversation naturally turned to the events of the day before.

"Using the bodies of mages to summon magic is a dreadful thing," Legis spat in a rare display of undisguised irritation.

Tinasha's face darkened. "That type of forbidden curse was attempted often in the past, but I don't think the effects are worth the high number of sacrifices. At best, the caster only becomes a slightly stronger mage."

In the end, seven people had perished for a mediocre power increase.

Someone with true knowledge and strength would've been able to call a fantastic amount of magic from the flesh of just one powerful individual used as the catalyst. Tinasha was once the recipient of such colossal magic from a forbidden curse, though she herself had not asked for it. The memory of that event was bittersweet.

Sighing, Legis said, "I suppose in the end, we can't completely stop the use of forbidden curses."

"Unfortunately, that would be very difficult to achieve. People believe that great risks mean great rewards. In reality, there is no case that I know of in which a forbidden curse successfully led someone to their goal."

In all Tuldarr's records, nearly every forbidden curse ended with the caster dead and the curse either disintegrating or causing wild, unplanned mayhem. There weren't many who knew that, though.

If that knowledge was made public in an attempt to deter future incidents, it would only end up revealing more information about forbidden curses. That was a danger that could not be overlooked. No matter how loudly they might preach about the futility of forbidden curses, those who sought power wouldn't listen.

As a result, a force capable of stamping out those threats was vital, and the queen had already taken steps toward creating one.

Ever since Tinasha first began considering dissolving the contract with the mystical spirits, she had also started plans for how the mages of Tuldarr might fight back against a forbidden curse. In the days leading to her coronation, she'd selected qualified candidates and had begun running them through battle-oriented drills.

When Legis inquired how that program was going, Tinasha smiled. "It's going well. Everyone is very talented, and they're quick learners."

"I see... Do you think that, in a real-world scenario, they could defend against a forbidden curse?" he asked.

"I do. In magical warfare, firepower alone isn't what decides things. It's about how it's utilized... In other words, it's more important to devise a winning strategy. In that sense, it's no different from regular combat, and carefully laying preparations can actually be more effective than anything else. That's especially the case when spells are set in advance."

A team of multiple spell casters with finely honed magic would absolutely be enough to defy a forbidden curse if they used their power in the right places and at the right times. When Farsas had defended against Druza's forbidden curse, Oscar had noted that a head-on battle was pointless. Tinasha felt the same way, which was why she was instructing

magicians on technique and knowledge. As an elite unit that could tacitly communicate and understand each other, they would be more flexible and dynamic than a single powerful mage fighting alone.

"It's usually a group of magicians who are behind a large-scale forbidden curse, and they're all reliant on the spell. I don't think it should be so very difficult to rein them in," the queen stated confidently, and Legis nodded.

However, another possibility occurred to him, and so he asked, "What would you do against a witch?"

Though he had voiced the question off the cuff, it was a weighty one. Tinasha's face turned pensive, and then she smiled slightly. "To be honest, I don't know. I think it would be a pretty tough battle, because a witch would have so much more experience. Perhaps we could set up a very carefully laid trap... It would be best to avoid a direct confrontation."

Legis was silent for a moment, for he had anticipated that reply.

A witch would certainly be much more formidable than even a large-scale forbidden curse.

The Witch Killer Queen knew better than anyone how terrifying it was to face off against someone with powerful magic, experience, and a will of their own. Only four such women had come to be called witches.



Sunlight streamed into the room—a rare occurrence. When Valt returned, he stared at the shafts of light with some surprise.

Miralys was sitting in her chair, hugging her knees to her chest. The bright afternoon sun made her snowy white skin shine. Her light green eyes caught his. "You're back. Are you tired?"

"Yes, it was pretty exhausting calling it up alone. But what's going on? You have the curtains open."

"I'll have to go into the outside world soon... so I'm acclimating myself," Miralys answered.

"Ah, I see," said Valt, a smile tugging at his lips at what a good, faithful girl Miralys was. He could feel his exhaustion melting away. Still, he made sure to ask her what he needed to ask. "Is the spell ready?"

"Yes, it's done. It took a while, but everything is fine."

"Thanks."

Miralys was quite good at spell crafting. There was no need to worry over that part.

However, what did warrant concern was how their opponents' forces would be deployed. Valt couldn't help voicing his uneasiness. "I'm the most anxious about where the spirits will be placed. Keeping track of twelve really is tough."

"I'll be fine, since I have enough magic to confuse them... but you be careful," Miralys replied.

"I will. I'll be sure to put them to work pulling that off, too," Valt said with a little yawn as he glanced out the window. On the other side of the glass, he could sense a peculiar magic drifting in the air. The country would probably change overnight.

That was only the beginning, though. A self-deprecating expression formed on his face. "I'm going to sleep. I have to replenish my magic."

"Okay. Good night," Miralys said with a little wave of her fingers. Poison lurked somewhere in that innocent smile of hers.

Everything hinged on tomorrow. The curtain would finally rise on their story.



The noontime sun blazed, bathing the earth in light.

The fortress of Ynureid stood at Farsas's northernmost point and was built on terrain that was comparatively cooler because of its high elevation. The sun still bore down on it fiercely, though.

The first one to notice was a mage on the rampart.

About 60 percent of the main fort's exterior had been rebuilt by a team of mages specializing in architecture, while artisans worked on the interior simultaneously. Mages were now setting up defensive spells along the outer walls. One of them looked up, sensing a flow of unusual magic. Something had gotten caught by the numerous surveillance wards placed at the national border.

He narrowed his eyes. A dark shape was slithering on the horizon.

It was impossible at this distance to distinguish exactly what it was, but it was clearly abnormal. The man raced along the ramparts to the general.

The hasty report reached the king in Farsas Castle five minutes later. Upon hearing the news, Oscar lifted his eyebrows. "Cezar made their move already?"

Cezar's hostility toward Farsas was nothing new. It was most likely misguided resentment stemming from the fact that Farsas was a powerful country blessed with natural resources. But in hundreds of years, Cezar had never once attacked its enemy directly. This sudden action had to be the result of their evil god or some other entity spurring them to it, just as Druza had been pushed to strike with the forbidden curse.

Nonetheless, Oscar had been expecting this since he'd learned what Tinasha's investigation uncovered. Swiftly, he issued orders to his attendants and left the room to prepare for battle.

One hour later, he and his army teleported to Ynureid.

"What's the situation?" the king demanded.

The general bowed. "Most of the enemy army is infantry, so their pace is slow. It should take them another hour to arrive. Their numbers are close to forty thousand. However, er..."

"Yes?"

"The mages claim they sense some manner of abnormal magic."

Oscar's attendants gasped. Undoubtedly, they were all thinking of Druza's forbidden curse.

Aware that this thought had just put them all on edge, Oscar grinned wickedly. "Now everyone thinks they can just whip out whatever weird thing, since they know they can't beat us in a head-on fight..."

After what Druza did, a treaty was freshly signed banning the use of forbidden curses in cross-national wars. What had Cezar brought out now? Surely not a real evil god? Oscar's brain whirled. "This'll be a gamble."

It was painful not knowing what their enemy had up their sleeve. But that just meant Farsas had to crush them before they could let loose whatever odd thing they had. Oscar gave orders to that effect, a grave expression on his face.

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The half-finished fortress of Ynureid loomed before them. General Tarvo, leading the vanguard of Cezar's army, restrained a laugh as he eyed it. He thought of Druza, which had only recently relied on a forbidden curse and suffered defeat.

"Of course Druza lost going about it that way. Even if they had destroyed the stronghold and army with their curse, what were they going to do once they'd used it all up?"

Any way you looked at it, overpowering Farsas was impossible without enough strength to last through a long struggle.

Cezar wouldn't make such a foolish mistake.

Over long years, it had raised troops for just this purpose. What's more, the nation had *that*. Victory was in sight.

However, there was one uncertain element, and that was the queen of Tuldarr, the king's fiancée. Things could get dicey if she led her country to intervene in the conflict. The general wanted to weaken Farsas before that could happen.

"Have they not noticed us yet?"

The fortress still looked the same.

From horseback, Tarvo surveyed his infantry. He opened his mouth to give the order to speed up their march. But before he could speak, a fog suddenly rolled out. It was thick enough to block out the soldiers' field of vision, even on the sunny plains.

"What is this?! What is happening?!" Tarvo shouted, jerking around to check behind him, but the soldiers showed no reaction and kept on advancing. He was glad to see that the march wasn't impeded, but he was worried, nonetheless. Was it wise to continue in this fog when they had no idea which direction they were headed?

It didn't look like any ordinary mist, meaning it had to be magic. Tarvo wasn't a mage, though, so that was as best as he could comprehend it. He

turned back to ask his officers for guidance, but the fog was so thick that he couldn't see them.

After about five minutes of moving through the vapor, debating the entire time if they should stop, Tarvo and the rest of the army finally emerged from the fog. All of a sudden, he could see again, as if what had happened was just an illusion, and the fortress was much closer than it had been.

"So we were on the right path..."

He had been fretting that the magic was meant to throw off their course, but everything seemed fine. Feeling reassured, Tarvo took hold of his reins.

And that was when something came whistling through the air. Tarvo stiffened, then tumbled from his mount. An arrow was lodged in his helmetless head, piercing one ear and going out the other. His horse slowed and shook its head, seeking its rider that had disappeared from the saddle. A soldier who was walking behind ran into the steed.

Despite the obvious attack, the Cezar army couldn't stop immediately upon losing a commanding officer.

In the next moment, the Farsas army attacked from their right flank.

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"This magic is pretty powerful," muttered Kav, who was casting spells from the fortress.

In the distance, Farsas's and Cezar's armies were clashing on the plains. Sylvia, who was watching the battle from beside Kav, nodded.

Producing fog on even ground was a potent type of spiritual magic that, ordinarily speaking, no regular mage could wield.

However, Tinasha had reworked the spell so that a team of ten mages could handle it and had taught it to those she was close with in Farsas. Tinasha had used this very tactic herself during the incident with the princess of Yarda; it was highly effective in combat.

While the fog robbed the enemy of sight, the Farsas troops had split up and teleported in groups to places along the Cezar army's flank.

Once the fog dissipated, they launched an attack from the enemy's blind spot.

Kav noticed that the Cezar army's formation was collapsing under the force of Farsas's charge and whispered, "I hope this ends quickly..."

An ominous chill ran up his spine.

The majority of Cezar's forty thousand troops were foot soldiers. The Farsas cavalry rode into the middle of the infantry but were surprised to find no real resistance. The enemy moved sluggishly and were cut down as easily as grass.

It quickly became apparrant what was wrong. Enemy soldiers who should've been fatally wounded were still fighting back, swinging their swords as if nothing had befallen them.

Slowly but steadily, those blades pierced the horses' bellies. With loud whinnies, the steeds collapsed, and their riders tumbled off their backs. They cried out upon finding themselves hemmed in by Cezar forces. "These demons!"

Their eyes were cloudy, and the flesh of their cheeks was rotting. The gray pallor of their faces was unmistakable—these were dead men walking.

"Your Majesty!" shouted Doan.

"I know," Oscar replied sullenly from the front lines.

This was the abnormal magic. While ordinary humans were mixed into Cezar's army, the majority of the fighters were animated corpses.

"Those who are taken to Cezar's castle never come out again, huh?"

Tinasha had said something like that to Oscar once. He hadn't wanted to learn the fates of those unfortunate souls, and yet here they were. Oscar clicked his tongue in annoyance.

The Farsas troops had stopped in their tracks, overwhelmed with fear. Their enemy was already dead and so couldn't be killed. That said, the corpses couldn't heal themselves. If their limbs were lopped off, the remaining corpse would only writhe disturbingly on the ground. While this could hardly be considered ideal, it was better than nothing.

"I guess we'll make magic our main offense... It's not really my style, but go ahead," Oscar ordered, and the Farsas army formation shifted. As the cavalry soldiers held their positions, the mages behind them began to set the cadavers on fire. Puppeteered by some sort of spell as they were, they ceased moving once they were burned with magic. Similarly, Akashia could also render them motionless.

A full-size Nark spewed fire onto the dead army from the sky.

Oscar groaned as he beheld the scene. "There's no end to them."

Right now, things were fine. But Oscar wasn't sure if this method would hold up against the entirety of Cezar's soldiers.

Unlike Tuldarr, Farsas did not have vast reserves of mages. Most of them were at the fortress or castle. Only around twenty were on the battlefield.

A scowl on his face, Oscar exhaled hard. As he cut through the shambling cadavers, the king said to the mage mumbling incantations behind him, "Doan, hit me with a little magic."

"What?!" Doan yelled, going wide-eyed at his king's extreme request.

With a serious look on his face, Oscar urged, "Do it quick. It'll alert Tinasha. It's our best chance."

Tinasha had cast an anti-magic barrier on Oscar that alerted her when he was struck by a spell. It was what had brought her to those strange ruins.

Grasping Oscar's intention, Doan drew up a simple attack spell. Before it took shape, though, a voice called down from midair.

"Could you *not* summon me that way?" The woman was very obviously annoyed.

Just as Oscar and Doan looked up, a dreadful and thunderous roar rocked the entire area. Glaring light flooded the front lines and the Farsas soldiers instinctively shut their eyes against the sudden flash.

When they cautiously opened their lids again, they were all astonished to find the corpses they had been battling collapsed on the ground like marionettes with their strings cut.

"Wh-what on earth just happened...?"

Soldiers gasped when they saw huge swaths of open space where thousands of corpses blanketed the earth. The remaining Cezar cadaver soldiers appeared to notice the abrupt vacancies and began to shuffle toward the Farsas troops.

Frowning, Oscar said to the woman in the sky, "You sure do know how to make a spectacle."

"I wanted to buy us a little time to talk," Tinasha explained as she descended. She was wearing mage's robes, though not formal ones. The form-fitting white attire hugged the shape of her body and was emblazoned with magical sigils. The outfit had seemingly been designed for ease of movement, as deep slits ran up along both sides of the skirt, providing glimpses of Tinasha's milky-white legs.

She was equipped with multiple magic implements strapped to her slender arms and legs, and what had to be an ensorcelled dagger was belted at her waist. She was obviously ready for battle. A young man and woman stood behind her, awaiting orders; Oscar recognized them as two of the twelve mystical spirits.

Oscar's eyes grew wide as he took in his very first glimpse of Tinasha's battle uniform. "That's some getup."

Tinasha beamed, her eyes narrowing. When the expression faded, her eyes became as dark as the abyss and filled with unmistakable majesty.

"The queen of Tuldarr, Tinasha As Meyer Ur Aeterna Tuldarr, has arrived. I have detected the use of a forbidden art, hence Tuldarr's decision to intervene at this juncture. We will dispose of this entity that should not exist, and no harm will come to either country," she proclaimed in a full, sonorous tone.

Oscar grinned. He kept his response outwardly serious as he replied, "Understood. Thanks for acting so fast."

Tinasha replied with a broad smile of her own and launched into a detailed explanation. "I will leave four of my spirits here. Also, that group over there is in training at the moment, so use them any way you wish."

She indicated a spot close to the rear left flank of the Farsas army. About twenty mages stood next to horses some distance away. Upon catching Oscar's gaze, they bowed.

"Mages from Tuldarr, huh? That'll be a big help," Oscar remarked.

"My intention was to create an anti-forbidden-curse unit, but I didn't think it would see real combat this soon, so they're all still learning. Rest assured, however, that they are excellent mages," Tinasha clarified.

Oscar cocked an eyebrow. "How am I supposed to interpret that? Don't give such a misleading explanation. And when you say you're leaving them here, do you mean you have something else to do?"

"I'm going to go strike the heart of the corpse army."

"Is it an evil god?"

"Yes," Tinasha responded flatly, and though the words *evil god* still sounded too ridiculous to be believed, Oscar frowned. Tinasha was floating in the sky, so Oscar beckoned her to come closer. Once she did, he grabbed her arm and pulled her onto his lap, making her black eyes go wide with surprise.

With a light flush on her cheeks, the queen admonished him, "Oscar, we're in the middle of battle..."

"Forget that. What's this evil god? Do those really exist?"

Oscar had never once thought such things were real.

Tinasha made a face. "I don't think it's a mythological deity like Aetea, no. But it does exist in the sense that it's a mass of accumulated magic and energy. I think it's going to be pretty difficult to take it apart, which is why I'm the most qualified to go after it."

"If you think you'll have a tough time, wait just a little and I can go with you to help," Oscar suggested.

"I'll be fine," Tinasha assured him. The smile on her face felt so ephemeral that a jolt of concern lanced through Oscar.

He held her tighter in his arms. "You'll win, right?"

"Of course," she said immediately. Oscar gazed searchingly into her dark eyes, seeing his own face reflected in the depths of night there. He could feel confidence thrumming through her lithe frame. As this wielder of both strong magic and fierce determination grinned up at him, Oscar couldn't help matching her expression.

Then he glanced over her head and noticed soldiers coming closer. "Guess we're out of time."

There was no longer any time to chat. Sensing the enemy approaching, Tinasha attempted to float up into the air, but Oscar kept his sword arm tight around her side. With his empty hand, he tilted up her chin. "Come back to me, all right?"

"Leave it to me. I'll beat you to the fortress and be waiting for you," she replied with a graceful smile. Every time he saw that look on her face, it drew him in and charmed him so irrevocably.

Oscar drew close and pressed a kiss on Tinasha's soft lips. It was just a light brush, but the warmth of it reached her heart.

When he pulled back, a bright red had spread across her ivory complexion. Covering her face with one hand, she turned away. "What do you think you're doing? Didn't I tell you we're in the middle of battle?"

"Mm-hmm. Do your best out there," he said, releasing her so she could float away.

Cheeks still pink, Tinasha turned to the two spirits. "Senn, Lilia, I'll be counting on you."

"Understood."

"Yes, my lady."

"You too, Kunai and Saiha," Tinasha added, naming two more spirits who had not yet appeared. But then the queen giggled; evidently, they had given a reply only she could hear.

After that, her eyes focused on Oscar again. With a look like cool, clear water, she called to him. "Good luck in battle."

"You too," he answered.

Tinasha turned in midair to head in the other direction. Then, while Oscar was still watching, she vanished.

Oscar allowed himself one smile before his expression turned serious and he adjusted his grip on Akashia. The corpse troops were almost upon him now.

The Tuldarr mages mounted their horses and joined the ranks. The two spirits drifted to their own spots.

After confirming everyone's position, Oscar gave a short, sharp exhale and drew himself up straight. "Let's go."

His clear voice signaled the continuation of battle.

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A half hour's ride toward Cezar from the battlefield, *it* lay enshrined in a flattened patch of grass and brush.

Tinasha, who had tracked its magic to the source, frowned sourly down on it from the sky. "That's... quite something. What a grotesque shape."

The spirits Karr and Mila stood on either side of her. The red-haired girl grinned at the queen of Tuldarr. "Lady Tinasha, do creatures like that disgust you?"

"I mean, it doesn't have any legs, and it's enormous," Tinasha replied.

"Should I make it some legs?"

"That's not the issue."

Far below their lighthearted banter, a dozen mages were working to control the evil god, Simila. It was in the form of a gigantic black snake, but that was only clear to those hovering above. Up close, it was so large that it must have been impossible to determine its shape. It was long enough to wrap around ten houses and as thick around as two full-grown adults placed end to end. Such a colossal serpent did not exist in the natural world. With its eyes closed, it coiled around itself in a leisurely manner.

The snake's tail was attached to a dark hole that opened in the ground. Upon closer observation, the snake had emerged from this magically created aperture.

Tinasha glared into the depths of the hole. "Do you think that connects to something?"

Karr, the seemingly male spirit, answered, "Perhaps it's a conceptual entity? If it's stemming from some manner of root, then I'd wager that's the connection."

"A root, hmm? I believe the evil god itself is made up of magic and human souls. Then it's solidified with human flesh... and manifested according to a set definition. There must be a very capable mage behind this."

"One with some *nasty* tastes, though," quipped a spirit, and Tinasha nodded her agreement.

That serpent was the evil god that, once manifested, acted as the source of the magic controlling the corpse army. It was more akin to a crystal containing a forbidden curse than to a demon that came into being organically. Its huge body seethed with resentment toward humans, and its mere existence polluted the surrounding air.



Tinasha looked at the spirits on either side of her and snapped her fingers. "All right then... let's do a little trial."

In response, the two spirits teleported to other points around Simila, so that they formed a triangle with Tinasha.

Tinasha stretched out her right hand, palm facing up.

"Despair that refuses sleep soars through the night. The moon shines on the far side of the sky, a prayer that can never cross over.

"So shall it be defined, so shall it manifest. Power as power shall seek that line. Upon disappearing it will turn to nothing in the air.

"I command the procession to never end. Hidden words confront form."

As the queen recited her incantation, the two spirits also began their own.

An enormous array stitched together in the sky, Tinasha's spell intermingling with those constructed by Karr and Mila to make an intricate configuration. The mages controlling the snake noticed the unique magic and looked up to the sky.

At first, Tinasha and her spirits had remained invisible in order to observe the group. Now they appeared proudly as embodiments of devastating power. As the mages below realized the spell was like a net entrapping them, they trembled with fear.

"Hey! Put up a barrier..."

"We can't, there's no time!"

They were right, for not a moment later, the spell was complete, and its magic triggered. Silver chains manifested, glittering as they fell onto Simila.

An argent web now hung on the snake's gigantic form. Power began to burst as it blanketed the evil god.

A flash of light seared the world. Moments later, a delayed boom from the explosion rent the air.

A Cezar mage crouched to the ground, ducking and covering his head. Hot wind whipped up pebbles that buffeted his body. There came the horrible sound of bits of flesh whistling through the air.

Seconds later, all was silent again, and the mage gingerly looked around. Beyond a cloud of dust lay the ebon form of Simila. The mage stood up to assess the situation—but that was when a strange sensation made his hair stand on end.

He looked down.

Scattered black residue was tangled around his feet. Very slowly, it crawled up his legs.

"Ahhhh!" he shrieked in fear, but there was no need for that.

The vestiges of Simila leaped up farther on his body from that momentum, wrapped around his throat, and tore into him.

"Oh no... That's revolting," remarked Tinasha, her face twisted with disgust as she watched this all play out from above.

Her attack had blown up half of the snake, but the residue was devouring nearby mages to reconstitute itself. In a matter of seconds, the evil god had created a dozen moving corpses and had returned to its original shape. Tinasha could also tell that it was drawing up more power from its tail, which was connected to the hole.

Slowly, Simila lifted its head to face its enemy in the sky. Eyes as red as blood fixed right on Tinasha. Its scarlet tongue flicked out as if it were locking onto its prey.

There was no doubting this unsightly creature was an evil god. An ordinary person would have already collapsed from fear, but Tinasha regarded it evenly, meeting its crimson gaze.

As she watched, the serpent slowly drew its head back. Then it launched itself at Tinasha, swift as the wind.

It whizzed through the air at such a speed that it was invisible. But she had expected this.

As Tinasha expanded her defensive barrier, she dodged to the left of Simila's maw. The snake noticed this, however, and twisted itself in midair, turning to grab her.

With a frown, the queen began to cast a new spell while maintaining her defensive one.

"Take that!" she cried, sending herself and her barrier flying through the air to kick both feet at the snake's head. The recoil bounced her away.

Then she brought both hands together and released more magic. An intangible pressure twisted Simila's neck, and an ear-piercing shriek escaped its throat.

"Ugh, it's so loud..."

Tinasha teleported over to Karr to escape the writhing serpent. Despite the force tightening around the evil god's body, it showed no signs of weakening.

"We're in quite the predicament. We can use these makeshift measures to keep it restrained, but that won't solve anything for good," grumbled Tinasha.

If she didn't completely eliminate this thing, the corpses out on the plains would keep moving. But she was up against something very powerful, not an opponent that would go down easily.

Karr gazed down at his master. "What do you wanna do, little girl?"

"Hmm... mmm... can we cut off the power coming from that hole?"

Karr glanced over at the pit the snake had crawled from, and then over at Mila, who was floating a distance away from it. The evil god was still wriggling about, trying to break free of the pressure on its neck.

"Not with two of us," Karr answered. "But I think five could do it."

"Then that's what we'll go with," the queen decided.

"What'll you do once the supply is cut off?" Karr inquired curiously.

Tinasha smiled. Her dark eyes narrowed like she was looking at something far in the distance. “Do you remember when I was made the way I am now?”

Karr let out a little gasp. Of all the spirits, he was the one who knew exactly what she was referring to—that incident four hundred years ago when she absorbed huge amounts of magic. Karr had been the ruling king’s spirit at the time, and while he hadn’t been in the room, he’d pieced together what happened based on the flow of magic.

“Hey... are you really thinking of absorbing that thing?”

“Not much of it is made of magic. I will divert away the souls and flesh and take in only the raw power. Once it no longer has the strength to stay manifested, it should fall apart on its own,” Tinasha explained, her light tone belying the severity of what she was proposing.

Karr gave her a warning. “That does sound logical, but it’s really dangerous. What if you take in too much magic and you explode?”

“If it starts to feel like I can’t handle it, I’ll drain some of it away,” she stated, flashing the spirit a reassuring smile.

It was hard to tell who was the master and who was the servant. Tinasha ever placed herself in the most dangerous positions.

Once the spirits answered their queen’s call and appeared, they were free to carry out her orders as they saw fit. But that, in turn, meant that they could not render aid unless called upon.

Tinasha was the type to avoid relying on others, to a reckless degree. She would first try to solve the problem herself. Karr, who had known the young woman since her childhood, grew occasionally frustrated with how stubborn she could be.

As he looked between his master, still so small, and the gigantic coils of Simila, he snorted. “I guess this is the only way...”

None of them knew if there was a limit on the power feeding into the serpent from that hole. That made a prolonged head-on battle disadvantageous. The surest way to eliminate it would be with its power supply cut off.

Karr acknowledged Tinasha’s plan, and she nodded. “Go ahead, then.”

As she spoke, Tinasha summoned up three more spirits and positioned herself before Simila’s vermilion eyes once more. It had finally shaken off the constraints she’d placed on it.

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Farsas held the front line and gradually began to push the Cezar troops back. Magical explosions detonated constantly, blasting apart the Cezar forces. Witnessing that power from the very front of the vanguard, Oscar gave a wan smile. He said to the spirit woman floating next to him, “Wow, was the war with Tayiri four hundred years ago like this?”

"No," answered Lilia. "The corpses are moving much slower and burning easier this time, so things are going far more smoothly. We also didn't have as many mages from Tuldarr... It was particularly hard fighting against the cavalry."

"I see," Oscar responded.

Lilia flicked out a hand and a lightning bolt blew away some cadavers. Without stopping to check that it had worked, she moved on.

The four spirits the queen had left were flitting about the front lines, providing support all over. They were immensely strong, which came as powerful reassurance to the Farsas troops.

"The hard part is not being able to see the end of all this," Oscar muttered to himself, clearing away a swarm of rotting warriors as he steadily pushed the front line forward.

Just then, he detected something sharp and bloodthirsty heading for him from the side. Glancing over, he saw a cavalry battalion amid the corpses. At its forefront, a man clad in armor and armed with a longsword glared at Oscar with blazing eyes. Oscar regarded him with bemusement. The cavalry soldiers, so determined to fight, stood out among the lethargic dead. With a roar, they suddenly charged for the front line. The man in the lead was headed right for the king.

With a shrill cry, he lifted his sword high overhead. Oscar yanked his horse's neck aside and met the blade with his own.

The man's voice was a growl as he gave his name. "I am Tauma, a Cezar general. I know you to be the king of Farsas. You will battle me."

"Sure, but... are you even alive?" Oscar jabbed.

Tauma gave an unpleasant grin. "Why don't you find out for yourself?!"

The man's sword came whistling down for Oscar's life, but he parried it handily and counterattacked.

All around the two, mounted fighters on both sides clashed. Those mages mixed in were handling the corpses. The stench of blood and steel commingled over the plain.

Deep down, Oscar was shocked by how skilled Tauma was with a blade. His technique blended strength with accuracy. Even in a regular battle, he would be worthy of commanding a unit. However, that was as far as it went.

The exchange continued almost methodically until Oscar abruptly sped up his next thrust. Tauma narrowly evaded it, but he couldn't dodge the one after. Akashia sank into the joint between the armor plates at his shoulder, and then Oscar poured strength and speed into cutting Tauma down from his horse.

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The serpent's head lanced forward like an arrow, closing in on Tinasha. She barely dodged to the right; it missed her by a hair. Black thorns formed on the evil god's skin and homed in on her.

Tinasha whipped out the dagger at her waist and sliced at the sharp barbs. As she leaped farther back, she lopped off the tips.

"Ngh..."

There was a stab wound on her left thigh. Blood dripped and scattered on the breeze, but she ignored it and cast a new spell.

"Rise forth, o spray—"

Tinasha fired off five orbs of light with exact precision. As each struck Simila, black filth burst forth with a muffled *whump*. The substance wriggled slowly through the air before returning to the snake's body. The serpent lifted its head in Tinasha's direction; evidently the attack had accomplished nothing.

"It's like one endless, muddy mess. Oh, are we ready?" muttered the queen as she raced through the air. She glanced down at the hole after receiving word from one of her spirits. The five of them were floating in a circle above the pit the snake's tail connected to. An intricate spell configuration had already appeared.

"Then let's get started..."

On the queen's command, magic suffused the array. A spell pattern written in crimson emerged over the hole and cut through the tail. A burning, crackling noise sounded as interlocking rings slowly revolved.

Sensing something abnormal had struck its body, Simila turned back toward the pit. Its red eyes blazed as it focused on the five spirits.

It never had a chance to strike, for a cool voice commanded, "Over here."

Tinasha held out her arms. Simila craned its neck until she was within its sights.

With an arresting smile, she intoned her spell.

"The very first and very last despair you meet shall be me. Now let us dance."

The snake's murderous fury and the woman's compassion locked together in the air between them. Tinasha flung her arms open wide and a gigantic spell appeared. As the serpent lunged to rip her soft body apart, Tinasha sent the magic hurtling toward it. Silver threads billowed out into a veil of sorts that settled over the evil god.

Immediately, a plume of oily smoke rose from the serpent, and an acrid stench of rotten flesh wafted on the breeze. With a flick of her slender fingers, Tinasha sank her spell deeper into the gigantic serpent.

There was a sound like the tinkling of the finest chains being drawn. The silver threads were dismantling the flesh, human souls, and magic that made up Simila's body.

Dark, discolored flesh dripped to the ground, while the human souls turned to pale light. Tinasha diverted both away while pulling in the magic that remained.

Recognizing that its very existence was gradually waning, Simila seethed with more resentment than ever as it glared at Tinasha.

Its black head lowered a fraction. Then it lunged for her, its jaw open as wide as it could go in an attempt to swallow the young woman whole. It rammed into her protective barrier at a terrifying speed, but the magic shield held firm.

Tinasha had no words to describe what was happening

The magic she had taken in circulated through her body. She could feel her blood growing hot. Some sort of exquisite pain racked her frame.

At times, attacks grazed the queen's skin and sent blood flying, but she was indeed steadily dismantling the snake. The spirits observed the process, all with different expressions. The spell they had cast did a masterful job of keeping back the sinister power that was attempting to creep out of the hole.

One spirit peered into the dark pit. "Will this disappear once that snake does?"

"Probably. It looks like the terms of manifestation are centered within the serpent. We'll need to clean up the hole, but it shouldn't be too difficult once that thing is gone."

"Will our queen be all right?" another spirit asked with obvious concern, but Karr only gave a wan smile. Their master had a fragile body, but the power within it far surpassed theirs.

She was very much like a witch in that way, although it was a mystery how a human became one of them. Perhaps it was *because* human lives were so unstable that occasionally one shone with fearsome radiance.

The snake glided through the air.

The silver threads eating into it pulsed with the glow of magic. Pure red blood trailed in Tinasha's wake.

Tinasha flew up to dodge another lunge of Simila's head. Then she placed both hands on its body and slid herself around its circumference. She poured magic into every spot she touched, disassembling the creature. Only about half of Simila's corporeal form remained.

"Dissolve..."

With all ten fingers, Tinasha manipulated the spell. Bit by bit, the gigantic head lost shape, leaving only those wicked eyes.

As Simila's power diminished, Tinasha's grew immensely. When it seemed that victory was inevitable, Simila abruptly ruptured, scattering in all directions. Its enormous form turned to black filth and dispersed.

The spirits looked up at the dark remnants floating in the sky.

"Is it over?"

"No..."

Karr gasped. Bits of black gunk were swooping down on Tinasha one after another.

With an annoyed click of her tongue, Tinasha attempted to flee, but the filth entwined around her legs before she could. Shaking it off was useless, as it hardened instantly, giving the remaining bits plenty of time to gobble up her delicate frame.

"No..."

The queen was no longer visible. There was only a pulsating, bulbous black blob floating in the air.

Snapping out of her stupefied state, Mila made to shoot off into the air.

"Mila! Don't get close to it!" Karr shouted to stop her.

The red-haired girl whirled to face him, fury clear in her glare. "We need to get it off her now! It's going to use the magic she sucked in to possess her!"

"If you abandon the spell, she'll never win completely. Have a bit more faith!"

Karr's words rang true, and Mila fell silent. They were the ones keeping Simila from its power. If they stopped, and the gunk grew stronger, it would consume Tinasha. Gnawing on her lip in frustration, Mila returned to her post.

The spirits all gazed upward.

A weakly pulsating sac hung in the air beneath the blue sky like something ripped from a nightmare.

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"Lady Aeterna, the world is not only what we can see with our eyes. So many invisible layers are stacked together, and we call these planes of existence. From heavenly virtues to the depths of the sea, one world encapsulates all of that."

She had heard that somewhere before, although she couldn't recall where or when.

It was very dark.

Why was she in such a place? An unnamed consciousness drifted in a space without time.

Wordless whispers surrounded her. Resentment, resignation, and grief swirled about her like stagnant water.

The place opened by human flesh and souls. The interior of a bottomless hole.

It was so very bleak. There was nowhere to go.

"You should just go to sleep," whispered Resignation.

"All things end in tragedy," whispered Grief.

She was puzzled. Is that really so?

"There is no way you've never held a grudge against someone," whispered Resentment.

She gave a bittersweet smile. Yes, she had held grudges. But she could not remember them now.

She sank deeper into the darkness.

No, she wasn't falling. Planes of existence were slowly passing through her.

At the bottom of the hole was a murky sea.

The human world was actually flimsy and treacherous. This was the place below its bottommost layer. The human realm was like a tiny boat drifting through a stormy ocean at night. Once anyone learned of the endlessness beneath, fear would overtake them and rob them of happiness.

She observed herself sinking through the depths as if it were happening to someone else.

Exhaustion permeated her, and a faint grin came to her lips. Then she became aware of the expression, and it turned sharp and wry.

She could smile.

No matter how bad it was or how sad she felt, she could smile if she wanted to.

"You're so scared you can't help it," something whispered.

"I'm not scared," she answered, and she stretched out one ivory hand. "What do you want?"

"I want," came the reply. "I want to become one. Then there will be true stability. An incomparable peace of mind. The undermost layer the human soul can reach will catch every drop."

"I don't mind. But you are the same as me."

"The same."

The words echoed around.

She continued. "When you acquire me, I also acquire you. From the beginning, we have always been connected. It's only our names that are different."

The darkness was silent. Confusion developed. After a while, an answer came back from the drifting sediment.

"Then we are still different."

The darkness asked for her name.

She thought for a bit. As she scanned the lightless expanse, her lips formed the words, "My name is undefined."

She still lacked a title to represent her being. She had not yet hit on one, nor had she transformed into anything else.

However, she did know one thing.

"My element is—innovation."

Each person was born with an element they were unaware of.

However, she now understood hers.

Her words evoked its true essence. A change began to ripple through the gloom.

At first, she thought she had begun to float upward, but realized she wasn't moving. Innumerable planes of existence were passing through her. All of them were part of the world. She knew each and every layer. Her soul knew them.

So she touched the world and discovered the foreign objects placed inside it and the gazes trained on it.

She turned to look back at the planes passing by her.

"Are you waiting?"

They were quickly moving very far away. Even the things she had understood were vanishing.

She had never been a special piece of the puzzle.

Yet the destiny she'd been given and the fate she'd chosen made her something different.

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Under Mila's watchful glare, the black mass gradually shrank in size.

At first, she thought she was imagining it, but she wasn't. The sac contracted as though being sucked into its center. Then it ruptured open with a muffled sound.

Magic, souls, and remnants of flesh went flying, and in the middle of it all was a floating woman.

The backlash from the magic sent her glossy black hair whirling up behind her. Her wet, dark eyes burdened with sorrow were downcast.

Power erupted from her right hand, clearing the air.

At the same time, the hole from which Simila had manifested shrank as well. The dull, stagnant feel in the air faded, and Mila cried out, "Lady Tinasha!"

She glanced at the spirits, smiled, and attempted to wave at them, but flinched. "Oo-ow... I haven't felt pain like this in... four hundred years..."

"Of course you haven't. You're saturated with magic," Karr replied, shaking his head as he teleported to his master's side and gathered her up. "We'll handle the cleanup. You should go rest."

"Urgh... sorry about this..."

What power Tinasha hadn't absorbed was floating on the breeze. Although the hole had shrunk, it wasn't closed yet. If they didn't work more spells to get things sorted, all of it would end up rooted here.

"Should I send you to Tuldarr?" Karr asked.

"Oh... no, please bring me to the fortress of Ynureid."

"All right."

Tinasha looked to all five of the spirits present. "Thank you," she said to them. They bowed silently in response.

A smile bloomed on the beautiful queen's face, and she and Karr vanished.

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The wind ran across the battlefield.

There may not have actually been a breeze, but to Oscar, it felt like there was.

The body before him lay collapsed and motionless. And it wasn't just that one. One by one, the corpses toppled to the ground in a wave that left the

Farsas army speechless. Cezar's forces, which had already been reduced to half their original number, instantly dwindled to almost nothing.

The Cezar cavalry paled to see their fighting cadavers rendered motionless. Until now, they had been at a disadvantage, but the wall of moving dead had kept them safe from the Farsas troops. Suddenly, that buffer was gone, and discomfort was clear on their faces.

Oscar eyed the Cezar soldiers, smirking. "I guess that means... she won." No one was there to confirm it, but the dramatic change spoke for itself. To his attendants, Oscar said, "Let's mop this up quick and head back. I'm sick of looking at those dead things."

Sunlight poured down from the cloudless sky. On almost all the bodies blanketing the plain, there were no scars and no spilled blood.

The nightmarish landscape was sure to make stories of this battle the stuff of legends.

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Sylvia was there at the rampart to receive Karr and Tinasha when they teleported over. The young blond mage hurriedly showed them to a guest chamber so Tinasha could rest.

The room was sparsely decorated, but Karr breathed a sigh of relief as he lay his master on the wide bed. As he scrutinized Tinasha's pale, bloodless face, he asked, "How do you feel? You okay?"

"I'll be back to normal after a little sleep. Thank you."

"Good," Karr replied, his face solemn as he gave the queen of Tuldarr a brisk pat on the head. It did occur to him that this wasn't the sort of thing to do to one's master, but to him, Tinasha was still the kid who'd lived in the detached wing of the palace.

"All right, Mila's still shaken, so I'm going to go and help get things wrapped up. You take care of our little girl, pretty lady," Karr said to Sylvia.

"I will!" Sylvia chirped, both fists clenched with determination. She brought over a clean cloth right away and wiped the sweat from Tinasha's forehead. "What happened out there?"

"I'm not too clear on that myself. My memories are hazy... I was in this weird place, and I feel like it made sense at the time, but... for some reason, I can't remember now," Tinasha answered.

"Ah, that sounds like a dream. Although with dreams, you can still remember everything when you wake up."

"Yes, exactly. But in any case, I believe Cezar's forces should be severely crippled. The corpses are all dead for good."

"Then that means the king will be coming back soon, too!" Sylvia exclaimed with a grin, which made Tinasha smile, as well.

When Oscar saw her, he'd probably chastise her for doing something reckless. Absorbing the magic that made up an evil god was not a feat for a

normal person. When Tinasha took in all that magic four hundred years ago, the pain had been so awful that she'd been bedridden for a week.

Even so, Tinasha wanted to see him. Feeling supremely sleepy, she closed her eyes.

That was when a man's voice sounded in the room.

"We've got to hurry. I don't want to run into that Akashia swordsman."

Both women's eyes snapped wide open at the unexpected intrusion. Reflexively, Tinasha cast a spell. But just before she could complete it, something cold touched her wrist, and the spell dissolved.

"Huh?"

Sylvia was sent flying. She hit the wall and slumped to the floor.

"Sylvia!"

Forgetting her own agony, Tinasha tried to vault from the bed and run to her friend. Someone grabbed hold of her arm before she could, however.

A man's soft voice whispered in her ear, "You can have a nice long rest once we arrive. There'll be plenty of time."

Everything went black. As Tinasha fell into darkness once again, she reached out. However, there was nothing to catch hold of. She lost consciousness.



Most of the remaining Cezar troops had been subdued. Some had fled toward their homeland when Simila vanished.

A cursory interrogation of the prisoners of war revealed that Cezar had long been controlled by Simila and the cult centered on worshipping it. The current king, in particular, did whatever the cult founder said, leaving royal family members and magistrates powerless. Speaking out against decisions was tantamount to asking for death. All the while, the founder amassed sacrifices from all over the country to make a corpse army. Among those bodies given were living people who forfeited their lives to Simila for the sake of the long-awaited war against Farsas.

The cruelty and tragedy sounded like a terrible joke. Oscar made a face. "Should I kill that cult leader?"

He hadn't seen any such person during the fighting. Perhaps they were safe back in their own land.

Still, now that Tinasha had destroyed the object of their worship, the cult and its leader would lose power. Things inside Cezar would probably fall to pieces, but that lay outside Oscar's area of responsibility.

While arranging for post-battle cleanup, Oscar headed back to the fortress to go and see the woman who had won the day.

Naturally, he was aghast to discover something had happened that no one could have foreseen.

"What's going on here?"

Kav shrank back in the face of the king's indignation. Face pallid, he explained what had happened.

Someone had abducted Tinasha from the room where she was resting.

Sylvia had also been present and had been seriously wounded during the attack. Kav had learned of the events while healing her.

Fury blazing in his blue eyes, Oscar asked, "Did he have silver hair?"

The first possible culprit Oscar thought of was that demon king. He wouldn't put a stunt like this past someone like *him*. However, the answer he got indicated otherwise.

"No. It sounds like she didn't get a very good look at his face, but he was wearing black mage robes," Kav replied.

Oscar mulled that over, and then another possibility occurred to him. "Could it be... Valt?"

Reports had identified a male mage as being responsible for an attempt to poison Tinasha before she took the throne and for planting Delilah in the castle. Word had it that he bore a close resemblance to a Yardan court mage by the name of Valt who had visited Farsas before disappearing overnight.

And the Simila cult sent Delilah to Farsas Castle.

Everything was coming together. Valt's aim was Tinasha all along. He had tried to extricate the young queen from Farsas and take her for himself. Oscar cursed himself for taking so long to realize this.

Mila, evidently unable to stand it any longer, shouted, "Karr! This is all your fault! Why weren't you with Lady Tinasha?!"

"I'm sorry..." Karr replied, hanging his head and making no attempt to defend himself.

Mila looked like she wanted to start in on him, but Oscar interrupted. "Tinasha and I are the ones responsible. Can you track where she's gone?"

"Unfortunately... I can't sense Lady Tinasha's magic at all," Mila confessed. "I think she's either closed it off herself or something powerful has sealed it."

That left them with no trail to pursue. Irritation washed over Oscar, enough so that it showed on his face, a rarity when he was in the presence of others. "I'll contact Legis first. Whoever abducted Tinasha may have sent a demand to Tuldarr."

The last time Tinasha was taken, Oscar had managed to retrieve her right away. He wanted to hope that this time would be no different.

An unshakable dread settled deep within the king of Farsas, however.

Oscar closed his eyes and remembered Tinasha's clear smile from the last time he saw her.

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Legis was shocked to hear the news Farsas delivered.

The queen had left the country with the mages she was training and her spirits a few hours prior. No matter her opponent, he hadn't doubted that she would prevail. It had certainly never crossed his mind that she might vanish.

Oscar went straight from the battlefield to Legis, where he was received in a salon reserved for confidential discussions. As soon as the king of Farsas caught sight of Legis, he bowed his head and apologized. "What happened is entirely my fault. I am deeply sorry."

"You don't need to bow to me. She must have been negligent to some degree," Legis replied.

Tinasha herself had asserted that the single most crucial thing for a mage was meticulous preparation. And now she had fallen for a meticulously laid trap. Her enemy had bested her.

As Legis sat down, unpleasant scenarios ran through his mind. "It's possible we'll receive a ransom demand... but if we don't, it only spells greater danger."

Tinasha was a queen, after all. Her kidnappers might've only been after the woman herself. If that were the case, it would be very difficult to catch those responsible.

Before Legis lost himself in speculation, Oscar said, "Farsas is also considering invading Cezar. Evidently, it is under the control of a religious cult at the moment, and it's extremely likely that the man who abducted Tinasha is connected to that organization."

"Ah... isn't it possible that her captors have already fled Cezar? If so, then rushing in after them might put Farsas at a disadvantage."

"I'm aware of that," Oscar replied flatly. He had no interest in invading other countries, a fact made clear by how he hadn't pursued Druza during their incursion. Plus, if he invaded Cezar now, other countries would naturally turn vigilant.

Of course, it was obvious that Cezar was the one in the wrong, as it had mounted an army and brought in a forbidden curse, to boot. Yet it was Farsas that stood as a leading member of the Great Nations, and that was soon to be linked by marriage to Tuldarr. The country was perpetually in the spotlight, and thus subject to greater scrutiny and suspicion.

All this was at the source of Legis's concern. And Oscar was grateful for his candid thoughts. Legis's advised prudence wouldn't change Tinasha's situation, though, and Oscar wanted to strike fast.

Legis seemed to sense that determination in the other man and got to his feet, a pensive look on his face. "While she is... the queen of our country, I will leave this matter to you. To Tuldarr, she is like an unexpected stroke of luck. And that good fortune has always been directed at you. For that reason, Tuldarr will not criticize anything Farsas does in regard to her. We will work with you however we can, so please do everything to help her."

Oscar bit back a sigh. Legis must have known why Tinasha had come to this era. Tinasha likely hadn't confessed as much directly, but the answer had been there if Legis had searched.

A woman with such immense magic and authority had traveled four centuries to meet Oscar. Quite a few men would've found such a thing off-putting.

While Oscar understood that Tinasha could be a handful, it came as a package deal with her intrepid spirit and her childlike innocence, making her a rare woman in his eyes.

He wanted to make her his and never let her go. He certainly didn't plan on relinquishing her to someone who'd taken her by force.

"Thank you for your kindness. I promise I will bring her back," Oscar declared with a bow. He then bid farewell to Legis and departed Tuldarr.

There was no telling what the future held, but the king of Farsas stood on the front lines with firm resolve to forge his own tomorrow.

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"There aren't very many enemy forces left. We could overrun them," reported Mila, once Oscar returned to Ynureid, and he nodded. Most, but not all, of the spirits had expressed a desire to work with their master's fiancé in her absence. First, they had gone to Cezar's capital—the obvious starting place—for reconnaissance.

Once the red-haired girl finished her report, she wrinkled her nose and tilted her head to one side. "If you used the army, wouldn't it turn into a whole big thing and strand you there until everything resolves?"

"Yep, which is why it's a sort of last resort. We need to finish this as quickly as possible," Oscar said. They didn't know how many people they were up against, nor what their nature was.

Based on how cleverly Tinasha's abduction was carried out, it was clear that even if her captors *were* in Cezar, they would escape swiftly upon learning Farsas was invading. They might even have time to silence anyone who knew what was going on.

"I wish there was a more surefire way to do this," Oscar muttered. Karr and Mila said nothing.

The king looked from the two spirits to his advisers and attendants. When his gaze landed on Doan, he suddenly recalled something. "Oh yeah... she put a protective barrier on me. Could we use that to track her?"

"What? Oh, so she did. I would have never noticed without you pointing it out," Mila commented.

"She really did... It must be connected to her," said Karr.

"Could it work?" asked Oscar.

Mila and Karr exchanged glances. Karr crossed his arms, making a face. "Not right now. We can't see where the magic leads to. But if she were close by, it might lead to her."

“So I could be the key to tracking her down?” the king asked before falling into thought. No one missed the dangerous gleam in his eyes.

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The darkness said nothing.

When Tinasha was little, she had read somewhere that it was only the living who attached meaning to death. Was it salvation or repentance that they sought from it? Regardless, it didn't concern the departed. They no longer existed.

Tinasha believed that human thought was sacred.

However, when she learned that fact, it suddenly seemed like humans were not capable of genuinely mourning the deaths of others. It all felt so... tragic.

When she awoke, she was lying on her back in an unfamiliar room.

Her head was fuzzy, and her memories were a jumble. Tinasha slowly stretched both arms upward—and discovered something odd.

A silver bracelet was touching her left wrist. It was thick and ancient-looking. Its appearance was not what made it unusual, however. Her wrist was not inside the bracelet. Instead, layers and layers of fine chains kept her wrist and the bracelet bound tightly together.

“What in the world...?”

She touched the bracelet with her other hand; nothing felt off about its hard exterior.

Letting her arms fall, Tinasha yawned. Her body was heavy, and she wanted to sleep for just a bit longer. Just as she closed her eyes to pass out—a memory flashed through her mind.

“Nnn!”

With a wordless cry, she came back to her full awareness. She leaped to her feet, on top of the bed.

There was no one else in the plain and yet spacious room. Rubbing at her aching head, Tinasha climbed to her feet.

“Mila?” she called, which made her notice what was wrong. There had been no magic in the word. She couldn't summon her spirits.

That wasn't all. When she tried to cast a spell, her magic scattered. Only two times in the past had her power been so completely blocked. The first was when she'd touched Akashia, and the second was when she'd been in the Lake of Silence.

Dully, she stared at the bracelet attached to her. “I've been kidnapped...”

She hoped that Sylvia was all right.

Wondering where she was, Tinasha went over to the door that led to a balcony. Her room appeared to be on the second floor, overlooking lush greenery. The expansive gardens were not well maintained by any stretch of the imagination, and she inspected them with interest.

Tinasha could make out a faint reflection of herself in the glass. She was still wearing her battle mage attire. Her own blood dotted the fabric in places. The dagger she'd carried and all her other magic implements had been taken.

Scratching at her temple, Tinasha went back to the middle of the room and picked up a wooden chair. She hurled it at the door, and it flew through the air.

But as she had feared, no cracks formed in the glass from the impact. There was only the sound of the impact. The chair toppled to the floor, one leg now twisted.

"Hmm... this is a pretty sturdy barrier," she commented.

"So violent," a man remarked dryly from the one doorway in the room. He had light brown hair and eyes of the same color. His appearance exuded intelligence, and he wore a calm smile.

Tinasha spoke his name. "Valt?"

"It's been a while. I'm glad you were able to take the throne with no trouble," replied the mage who'd used psychological magic to sneak into the court of Yarda. Here was the man who had apparently been involved in numerous plots against her.

Cautiously, Tinasha turned to face him. "What do you hope to achieve? Who are you really?"

Valt only laughed, but Tinasha didn't miss the bizarre glint that flashed deep in his eyes for just a moment.

She couldn't use magic. No one could search for her. Truly isolated and helpless, Tinasha still drew herself up to her full height and fixed her gaze on him.

That made Valt grin. "I'm not going to hurt you. I only want to talk. Come, I'll make tea."

With that, he turned and left, leaving the door open. Tinasha wasn't sure what to do, but in the end, she followed him. Once they reached a large dining table, Valt began to brew tea.

"Go on and have a seat. It'll be ready soon," he said.

Despite the vast size of the mansion, the layout was not an aristocratic one. The kitchen and the dining rooms were connected, like in a commoner's home. Tinasha sat at the table while continuing to inspect her surroundings, and before long, cups of tea were brought out.

When she took a sip, Valt smiled from his seat across from hers. "How does it taste?"

"I make better tea."

"That's a shame," Valt answered with a laugh.

Tinasha stared at him coldly. "So? What did you want to talk about?"

"Must you rush? How are you feeling? You've been asleep for almost a full day."

"I wanted to rest for a little longer, but you've gone and done something ridiculous."

"I certainly didn't expect you to absorb components of Simila's physical form, but I should have known better. I did wish you'd waited a little longer, considering all the hard work I put into it, but it all went swimmingly."

Picking up on all the hints he had dropped, Tinasha couldn't help leaping to her feet. "*You* were the one who manifested Simila?"

"Yes, I was."

"Do you have any idea what you've done? That was—"

"Oh yes, I'm aware. And while I know how this sounds, I was only a tool in all of that. I merely did what I was instructed to do. It was the people of this country who decided to sacrifice their fellow citizens," Valt said.

Seething with rage, Tinasha spat, "That's not a very good excuse."

"It's not one at all. They did everything of their own volition. Honestly, if you look at it, you and your fiancé are partially responsible."

"What does... that mean?" she questioned, knitting her brows as she kept her eyes fixed on the grinning Valt.

Their gazes met. Had her magic not been blocked, the power might have crackled in the air around her. Such was the intensity in her glare.

It was Valt who looked away first. He gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. "You should sit. Doubtless, you're tired. Ah... if you'd like to change clothes, I'll get you something to wear."

Backing down, Tinasha pursed her lips. After a moment of indecision, she eventually sat back down.

"Even if you do, I can't put it on with this in the way," she replied, lifting her wrist to indicate the bracelet. She couldn't put her arm through a sleeve with that thing attached to her wrist. "Why is it on this way?"

"Ah, sorry. Only a member of the Farsas royal family can open or close that," he answered.

"What?!"

"It's called Sekta. It's a sealing ornament with the same properties as Akashia, and it's been passed down for centuries as a royal heirloom. Although I suppose no one there actually remembers it exists. My grandfather borrowed it from the Farsas treasure vault about forty years ago, as we suspected you would wind up in this era."

"Excuse me?" Tinasha said, unable to suppress the shiver that ran up her spine with that last bit.

If Valt was speaking the truth, then just how far back had this been planned? Were they really after her, someone from the distant past who may or may not arrive in this time period?

Glancing at how pale she had gone, Valt gave an uncomfortable smile. "Well, now that you've received some warning, let's dive right in. This is the truth that I wasn't able to tell you earlier. I... no, *we* are after Eleterria. You know what that is, don't you? The red and blue magic orbs that can take you into the past. We'd like you to get both of them for us."

The darkness in Tinasha's eyes froze over.

It was then that she understood what the wheel of fate revolved around.

“Why do you...?”

“Why do I know about them? Or why do I want to use them? I know because I am aware of many things. More than even you,” Valt replied, his lips quirking up into a sneer that veiled something unreadable. “One is in Tuldarr, and the other is in Farsas. You’re the best person to retrieve them. We actually wanted Delilah to get the one in Farsas, but she was no match for you. And now that you’re the queen, it should be a simple matter.”

Suddenly, everything fell into place.

The treasure vault in Farsas and the one in Tuldarr. Breaking into either was extremely difficult. Perhaps because of the Farsas royal family’s cavalier style, that country took a perfunctory view of its treasure vault. But Tuldarr’s was filled with priceless magic treasures. Only those authorized could enter. If Tinasha had married Oscar without becoming queen, even she would not be granted entry.

Which was why Valt had separated Tinasha from Farsas and forced her into negotiating with him.

“What... are you going to try and change if you have both?” she asked.

“I can’t tell you that just yet. But I will if you work with us and get both of them.”

“You think I’m going to cooperate with you?”

“I certainly hope so.”

Tinasha felt dizzy.

Despite not knowing why Valt sought the orbs, it was plain that letting him have them was unacceptable.

There was no telling how those little spheres could alter the world. They held tremendous power in the hands of someone with wicked intentions.

Tinasha had to stop Valt at any cost, regardless of whatever harm it brought upon her.

Inhaling deeply, Tinasha calmed herself and cleared her face of emotion. Just as her refusal was on the tip of her tongue, a loud male voice roared angrily from the corridor outside. “Valt! I know you’re here!”



Valt scowled. Before he could do anything more, however, the door flew open with a *bang*.

"Simila is gone! What are you going to do about it?!" boomed a man in extravagant robes. Rage colored his face.

"As I told you, that's not my responsibility," Valt replied.

The man was about to hurl more abuse at Valt when he caught sight of the woman sitting with her back to him. He circled around the table to get a look at her face. "You... you're the queen of Tuldarr! Valt, have you been conspiring with her this whole time?!"

"Absolutely not. That's very rude," Tinasha put in, offended. She shook her left wrist and the attached bracelet at him.

Once the furious man took that in, glee came over his face. "Great job, Valt! Now we still have a chance."

He reached for Tinasha, roughly grabbed her arm, and hauled her out of her seat. While she turned her face aside, he pulled her close for a better look. In her ear, he whispered, "You really are a pretty one, looking at you up close. No wonder you snared the king of Farsas."

"Disgusting. Please let me go," she demanded.

"Hmph. Stubborn. Whatever, you'll make a perfect hostage to threaten Farsas," the man said as he flashed her a sinister leer and licked his lips.

Feeling his breath on her face, Tinasha clicked her tongue in disgust.

This man had to be from Cezar. If Valt was to be believed, this was a person who'd decided to sacrifice his own countrymen. She drew back her leg to give him a nice kick in the shin.

Valt spoke up before she did, however. "Could you let her go? She's a very important guest of mine."

"A *guest*? Isn't it her fault that Simila's gone?" the man asked in disbelief.

"Even so, her role is over," replied Valt, lifting a hand. The man seemed to sense the presence of a spell forming, and he yanked Tinasha in front of him as a shield.

Tinasha's lip curled with revulsion at being treated like an object. "Excuse me..."

"Let her go. She's mine," snarled a wholly unexpected person. All three in the room went still. When Valt turned in his seat to look at the door, all the blood drained from his face. He changed the spell he was preparing and teleported away from there instantly.

Now alone, the Cezar man turned around slowly. With Tinasha held firmly in his grip, he locked eyes with the intruder in the doorway.

There stood the king of Farsas, with Akashia in hand.

On Oscar's left and right were Mila and Karr, with Doan and Als behind him.

Tinasha's dark eyes grew round and wide. "Oscar!"

"Wait just a damn minute," said the Cezar man who'd walked into a surprising situation. He looked down at the woman he was holding on to. She was now his lifeline, in a different way than he had originally anticipated.

Whipping out the dagger belted at his waist, the man pressed it to her neck. "Come any closer and she dies."

"Hmph. So we just have to keep our distance?" remarked one of the spirits disdainfully, and the man's dagger shattered to pieces. Shocked, he released Tinasha.

Without missing a beat, she ducked and slipped out of his range. At the same time, Oscar stepped right up and punched the man in the face, sending him flying like a rag doll.

Crouched on the floor, Tinasha craned her head to look back. "Do you really think we should let him live?"

"If I killed him here, you'd end up a bloody mess," Oscar responded, sheathing Akashia and helping Tinasha to her feet. He hugged her tight to him, making sure she was safe. "I really can't take my eyes off you for one second."

Irrepressible relief tinged his affectionate teasing.

Als and Doan searched the mansion but found nothing of note. All they could glean from the rooms and possessions was that a man and a young woman had been living there alone.

While they were conducting their search, Oscar settled Tinasha on his lap as he interrogated the Cezar man. It turned out that he was the founder of the cult that worshipped Simila and the mastermind behind the recent skirmish.

Oscar eyed him with open scorn. "We'll be taking you back to Farsas. You can tell us the full story there."

"Take him away, Mila," said Tinasha.

"Got it!" chirped the red-haired spirit, and she disappeared with the cult leader.

Tinasha heaved a sigh, then glanced up at Oscar. "Um, I'd like to get down now..."

"No."

"..."

Whether he was upset with Tinasha or not, he kept his left arm firmly wrapped around her. The abduction must have hit him pretty hard.

Tinasha turned her flushed face aside, feeling guilty. She held up her left wrist. "Then please take this off."

"What is it? I thought you were wearing it for a change of pace."

"It's a sealing ornament that belongs to *your* country!" she retorted.

At Oscar's dubious look, Tinasha relayed what Valt had told her. The king traced a finger along the bracelet, and it popped right open. He drew it free from the chains and lifted it up to examine it. "Hmm, so this was stolen forty years ago?"

"Apparently. Why is security so lax in Farsas?" Tinasha chided.

"How about you just organize things after we're married? Is this thing really that strong?" Oscar responded, and he touched the bracelet to her wrist. It clicked onto it as easily as it had opened.

Frowning, Tinasha cried, "Don't put it on me!"

"Oh, this is fun. Wonder how it works?"

"It is *not* fun!" she fumed. Oscar removed the sealing item and stowed it in his jacket pocket.

To test her magic, Tinasha cast a spell in her palm and then extinguished it. She glanced at Oscar and asked, "How did you find me?"

"I wandered around Cezar using that barrier you put on me to locate you. This house is in a town close to the royal castle," he explained.

"You *wandered around*? Right after the battle?"

"I wouldn't have found you otherwise. Two of your spirits were with me the whole time. It was fine."

"Oh... thank you," Tinasha said, feeling ashamed of how easily she had been kidnapped. More than that, however, she was grateful to those around her. For all her strength, there were many things she couldn't handle alone.

Oscar smiled. "I'm just glad we found you."

"Um, how's Sylvia?" Tinasha inquired.

"Good. Her injuries were healed. Two or three days and she'll be back to normal," Oscar assured her, and Tinasha exhaled with relief. She'd been fretting about her friend this whole time.

Als and Doan returned to report that they hadn't found anything of interest.

Oscar stood up with Tinasha in his arms. "Let's head back, then. Everyone waiting back at the fort is probably worried."

Tinasha caught his eye and smiled. Despite the delays, the war with Cezar was over, and it was the start of a new stage in the game.

■ 7. A Happy Kind of Sadness

“Marry me,” the man said, and the woman hearing these words opened her eyes wide. Reflexively, she glanced behind her, but the pair were alone in the tiny forest clearing. He was talking to her and no one else.

Unfortunately, he was a nobleman. She threw him a pained look. “Have you really thought this through?”

The words sounded like those of a nagging mother, and he grimaced. “I have, yes. I’ve my situation, yours, and everyone else’s. I’ve especially acknowledged how your mother may kill me. Despite all of that, I want to wed you. I can’t think about anything else.”

He spoke honestly and from the heart. The woman’s red lips opened on a sigh.

As she stared at him, his blue eyes gazed back at her, as expansive and patient as the sky.

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Upon returning to Farsas, Oscar settled Tinasha in his own chambers to rest. Her own chambers in the castle had been vacated prior to her coronation, and from a security standpoint, this was the safest place for her to be.

Tinasha had intended to return to Tuldarr, but she was so obviously worn out that it would damage her dignified reputation if she returned in her present condition. For that reason, Oscar had arranged with Legis for her to stay in Farsas for the time being, under the pretense of discussing Cezar’s recent invasion attempt.

Oscar posted a platoon of security guards outside the door and then set about the massive undertaking of processing the paperwork for the recent skirmish. His father, the former king, had taken on the lion’s share of his kingly duties while he was away fighting. Upon his son’s return, Kevin said simply, “Glad it went well.”

After an hour of finishing up some routine tasks, Oscar returned to his quarters to find Tinasha fast asleep, breathing evenly on his bed. She

seemed to have bathed and changed clothes, as she was dressed in a comfy white nightgown.

Oscar sat on the bed and carded his fingers through her hair. For the past two days, he had been too busy dealing with the post-battle aftermath and his search for her to get much sleep, but for some strange reason, he didn't feel tired at all. Unlike Tinasha, he could operate on four to five hours of sleep. At the moment, he felt more sheer relief at safely recovering her than he felt any sort of exhaustion.

Catching up one of her hands, Oscar pressed a kiss to it. Tinasha must have felt it, as she blinked her eyes open. "Oh... I fell asleep... I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Rest if you need to," Oscar said.

"I'm fine," she insisted, sitting up in bed. Oscar wrapped his arms around her and settled her in his lap.

"All right, so can I finally ask what that guy was after?" Oscar said. He had inquired about it at the mansion, but Tinasha hadn't given a clear reply because of the other people around.

Now that they were alone, Tinasha's bafflement was obvious as she revealed Valt's request, explaining that the two magic spheres were called Eleterria, and he wanted both.

"So it *did* have to do with those orbs," Oscar mused.

While it was a mystery how Valt knew of their existence, he undoubtedly hoped to alter the past in some way. If he knew that Tuldarr and Farsas each had one, he must have been very well-informed. Not only that—he and others before him had spent years plotting to steal the time-altering objects.

Upon realizing that, Oscar scowled unhappily. "No way of knowing what's the truth and what he's just bluffing about."

"But if just one orb can take you back into the past, why does he need both?" Tinasha wondered out loud.

"Great question. Maybe there's another way to use them if you have two?" Oscar guessed.

"Like going to the future? If that happened, we'd have no hope of beating him," Tinasha replied.

"It'd depend on what he uses them for," Oscar reasoned. Speculating wouldn't get them anywhere. The important thing was not to allow the orbs to get stolen. However, there was one thing that needed to be done.

"I'm going to ask my dad about the orb. The one in Tuldarr was sealed away four hundred years ago, right? So that means Valt could only have info on the Farsas one."

Tinasha cocked her head to one side. "You think he knows something?"

"He understands enough to realize the orb's important, since he put it in the treasure vault while his other mementos of my mom are displayed in his rooms. No matter how busy he may have been at the time, he wouldn't have mixed that u—"

Oscar cut himself off mid-sentence, having suddenly realized something. He stared at Tinasha intently; she squirmed under his gaze. "Wh-what is it?"

"Well, you were gonna use that orb when those kids died recently, weren't you?"

"But I didn't. Are you going to lecture me?" Tinasha replied warily.

"No. Fifteen years ago, Farsas had its own rash of missing children," Oscar replied. A series of kidnappings had occurred in the capital city. When the dust settled, over thirty kids were gone. One day, the abductions just abruptly ended.

Tinasha's black eyes grew wide. "Are you saying that someone did what I wanted to?"

"It's possible. No one has ever found the kids who went missing, so they must have failed," Oscar told her. And if *that* were the case, it might have had something to do with his mother getting sick and dying right around the same time.

Oscar urgently wished to ask his father about this, but formulating a strategy to counter the larger situation was equally pressing.

"I'll look into things on my side, so you just be extra careful for the time being. They've got an eye on you," Oscar cautioned.

Tinasha shrank in on herself. "Sorry."

Oscar burst out laughing and ruffled her hair. Tinasha glanced up, and he caught her eye. "Also, thanks for taking care of that evil god. You really saved us."

She gave him a bemused look that soon morphed into an enchanting smile. Oscar found himself breathless as he beheld it.

Selfless affection shone in her gaze. Her grin was mesmerizing—it captured his soul.

Tinasha was flawed, though she closely resembled perfection. Wanting to draw such a rare, distant creature close to him, Oscar caught her chin and brought her near, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. For a moment, Tinasha's eyes widened, but then her long black eyelashes fluttered as she closed her lids and accepted his kiss.

When he pulled back, she was blushing and averted her gaze. "You're too close..."

"I told you to get used to it. Besides, you've acted so comfortable with me for the entire time I've known you," he said snarkily.

"Because I thought I had no effect on you," she pointed out.

"You always did."

He'd always seen her as an alluring woman, although he didn't confess as much aloud. Instead, he dropped a kiss on her earlobe and wrapped his arms around her. He kissed a line down from her ear to her décolletage. When he buried his face between her soft breasts, he could feel her tremble, and how hot she'd grown.

Just how much determination and doubt made up this fragile little body of hers?

He wanted to touch every single part of Tinasha—her smooth skin and the blood beneath it.

Yet the more he felt, the closer he got, the more he knew he could never reach her. No matter how much he longed to, he would never have her soul. Her boundaries wouldn't permit it. All he could do was make love to Tinasha and be near her.

Aware of the insurmountable gap between them, he still found her very precious as he reached for her again.

He knew that the two of them shared that despair. Her eyes were so hot.

I'm going to cry, Tinasha thought.

She wasn't sad, though. Adrift on a sea of sensation and losing track of where she was, she felt content knowing that she was accepted for who she was.

The young woman blinked the moisture from her eyes. Gazing down at his face, a wave of affection overwhelmed her. An irresistible desire to hug him tightly filled her.

Instead of acting upon it, though, she used both hands to hold him at bay. "Wait, wait..."

"Why?" Oscar asked, truly confused as he stared at his fiancée.

Tinasha looked away, refusing to meet his eyes. "We're not married!"

"But we're going to be, aren't we?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Then there's no problem," he decided, brooking no objections as he took Tinasha in his arms and lay her down in the middle of the bed. While she was still dazed, he interlaced his fingers with hers, pressing their hands into the mattress and gazing down at the beautiful woman.

"I'm not going to want to let you return to Tuldarr after this," Oscar whispered after a pause.

Magic gathered in Tinasha's body. "I'm asking you to wait. I will use force if I need to."

With a little smile, Oscar drew something from his jacket pocket and snapped it on to Tinasha's wrist. "I have tricks of my own, too."

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?!" she cried. He had placed the sealing bracelet on her, the one stolen from Farsas forty years ago. Tinasha shuddered, remembering how the dangerous magic implement had fallen into the hands of a terrible person.

Looking down at her, Oscar asked, "What are you unhappy about?"

He was serious. And the power in his gaze made Tinasha feel compelled to obey unconditionally.

"I—"

Suddenly, Lazar's panicked voice sounded from outside the room. "Your Majesty! Is now a good time?!"

"Of course it's not," the king grumbled, but he kept that quiet enough that Lazar wouldn't hear.

Oscar let go of Tinasha and reluctantly got up. While she sighed in relief, the king had a strained look on his face as he undid the bracelet. "I'll be stepping out for a bit, I guess. I already told Legis that you'll be here today, so sit tight."

"Th-thanks for that."

"Don't worry about it," Oscar said with a smile, and he patted Tinasha's head. His affection for her was unchanged, which she felt a little guilty about.

Once he was gone, Tinasha frowned and let out a big sigh.

"So, what's so important?" Oscar demanded.

"Ouch, ouch! Don't pinch me!" squealed Lazar.

"I'll pinch you as much as I want."

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!" Lazar cried as Oscar practically tugged him down the hallway by the cheek. When he was finally released, he rubbed his reddened face and blinked away the tears in his eyes. "A lady has arrived to see you, Your Majesty."

"Who?"

"Ah—"

Lazar cut himself off, but not out of hesitation. It was as if there was a gap in his memory and he no longer knew what came next. His lips opened and closed like a fish several times before he finally hung his head, dumbfounded. "I'm very sorry, but I don't know..."

Understandably, Oscar made a concerned face. "What's the meaning of this? Why did you rush over to get me, then?"

"I'm not sure... I just felt that I had to retrieve you immediately..."

"This makes no sense, but fine. Where is she?" Oscar inquired.

"In the audience chamber," Lazar answered.

Still unsettled by his friend's odd behavior and this unknown guest, Oscar headed for the room in question, where he found a woman with deep chestnut hair in a ponytail. Her clothing was ordinary and plain, not at all the garb of someone visiting the castle. Stranger still, she was alone in the room.

Finding it suspicious that his guards were absent when they should not have been, Oscar eyed this woman with apprehension. She looked to be in her midthirties, with features that were a bit sharp but still quite beautiful.

At Oscar's entrance, she looked him right in the eyes without wasting any time on formalities. Oscar was about to criticize her insolent, hard gaze when some strange malaise overtook him.

Something was off. He had the sense that he had met this woman before.

Irritably, she spat, "I wondered what you were doing when you got engaged, and now I see that all my hard work has been undone. Did that Witch Killer Queen do this?"

"I know your voice..."

Dull pain shot through Oscar's head. Memories he should have lost flashed through his mind like a bolt of lightning.

White nails

Moon

Depth of night

Blood

Ripped apart

Oscar stumbled a step back.

It felt for a moment like he'd lost his balance, but he steadied himself instantly. Mustering his strength, he drew Akashia and faced the woman with his sword at the ready.

He knew her voice and her figure. She had been a silhouette against the moonlight streaming in his window. Amid those memories he could not dispel, Oscar stood firm. "You're... the Witch of Silence!"

"Yes, I am. It's been a while. You've grown quite a bit," she remarked with a sneer.

"What are you here for?" Oscar demanded, his voice infused with power.

Lazar, who was standing behind the king, turned pale.

The witch merely stood there calmly, her lips curling upward. "I thought a single curse would take care of it. This is quite irritating. But now that it's been broken, I suppose there's no use crying about it."

She lifted her right hand in Oscar's direction and jabbed her pointer finger at his face. "I will end your destiny here."

Magic gathered at her fingertip, then poured forth.

Oscar inhaled sharply, then used Akashia to parry away an invisible spear. With its spell cut apart, the spear dissolved.

"Lazar, run!" Oscar shouted, without looking back. Then he lunged for the witch.

Without using incantations, the woman conjured more spears made of air. The relentless attacks left Oscar with no time to catch his breath, reminding him of Tinasha's drills. Lances flew toward him from all sides, but he cut down every one.

Then Oscar closed in on her. Just when Akashia was within range of attack, the witch teleported away. She appeared in the right corner of the large room.

"What an intriguing protective charm you wear... Is that the work of your little bride? Still, I do have another way," she said and snapped her fingers.

Cold danger ran along Oscar's nape. He ducked down, and something went whizzing over his head. Jumping back up, he saw that it was an entirely ordinary sword floating in the air.

"Ah. You're going to use a physical object since my barrier can repel magic," Oscar muttered. As if in answer, the hovering blade changed direction in midair, and then the sharp tip came rushing at him again. He parried it away with Akashia.

Immediately, another sword appeared right to his left. Somehow, he managed to twist himself and dodge away so it couldn't run him through.

The witch said in a clear, ringing voice, "Your reflexes are quite good. I wonder how many you can dodge?"

She smiled as she manipulated the array of weapons—regular ones that were not made of magic. For a second, her smile appeared more self-deprecating than anything, but that could have just been Oscar's imagination. A third blade dived for his legs, and Akashia smashed it apart.

Oscar leaped forward, evading more swords that came racing toward him from either side. As soon as he landed, he dashed for the witch. Another blade swooped in before him, however.

Without slowing down, Oscar smacked it away with the flat of Akashia.

He was closing in on the witch, whose cool expression remained unbothered. As he neared the final stretch, a sword jabbed at his left flank from a spot too close to avoid.

Thus, Oscar grabbed the weapon by the blade. Pain cut through his fingers, but he tossed the sword aside.

No sooner had he done so than sharp agony tore into his right calf. A blade had stabbed into it from behind.

Seizing upon Oscar's slowed pace, his opponent threw a second sword, which bit into his left shoulder.

The pain nearly claimed his consciousness, but he kept going and made it to the witch. Oscar whipped Akashia up with frightening speed.

"It's over."

Time seemed to slow to a crawl.

The witch wore a wan smile. Was it resignation in her eyes? Oscar couldn't say.

As Akashia traced an arc toward the woman's neck, an angry roar from the entrance to the room shook the chamber.

"Don't kill her, Oscar! That's your grandmother!"

Everything stopped.

He lost the will to fight.

His grip on Akashia weakening, the king opened his blue eyes wide.

The world was quiet, and only the witch dared to move as she fixed Oscar with expressionless eyes.

"You should dream of your childhood," she said, but he didn't hear it.

※

Oscar had almost no memories of his mother.

She'd died when he was five. Surely, that was old enough to recall a few things, and yet he couldn't.

He was told she'd passed because of an illness, but he never felt sad about it because he was cursed so soon after. To break the spell and reclaim

his future, he'd dedicated his youth to studying and swordsmanship. There'd been no time to mourn.

Everything related to her was just a blank.

※

When Oscar came to, he was in a long hallway. He glanced all around him—no one else was there. He was alone.

Recognizing where he was, he gazed absently at the walls. This was a corridor within Farsas Castle, a place he knew inside and out.

A row of windows lined the walls to his right, with doors on the opposite side. The windows were full of a lavender sky.

He couldn't see the end of the hall. It simply went on deeper and deeper. A glance backward told him things were the same in that direction. He stared at the row of doors.

Have there always been so many rooms here?

Puzzled, he pushed open the closest door and went inside.

It led to the castle courtyard.

A boy of seven or eight stood there, his back to Oscar. When he walked over, the boy turned around. "Is this where you've been, Your Highness? His Majesty has been searching all over for you."

Oscar recognized this child, for he'd known him all his life. The reply came to his lips naturally. "I only went out for a bit, Lazar. I'll head right over to him."

It was only now that Oscar realized he was a boy himself, only a little bit taller than Lazar.

It didn't seem particularly odd, though. They were close in age, so of course he was.

"Anyway, stop calling me 'Your Highness.' It feels weird."

"But that's who you are, Your Highness," Lazar protested, looking serious beyond his years. Up until recently, Lazar had called Oscar by his name, but for whatever reason, he had started acting more distant. Annoyed, Oscar sulked.

The practice sword at his waist had been crafted shorter to match his height. Unsure of whether he should leave it there, he decided to keep it on as he left the courtyard.

Oscar exited through the door and found himself in the long hallway again.

He didn't know why he was here or where he was going. Confused, he pushed open the next door. It led to one of the castle's lecture halls. When he approached the lectern, a man reading a book looked up. "Oh, Your Highness... what is it?"

"Have you found any clues about the curse?" Oscar asked.

"I'm very sorry, but not yet..."

Royal Chief Mage Kumu's face turned grave as he rubbed at his shiny bald head.

Oscar smiled at him. To conceal his fears, he said cheerily, "No need to worry. Something will turn up."

The mage bowed.

It had already been more than five years since Oscar was cursed and there were still no clues. As the matter concerned the future of the royal family, no one outside the nation could be consulted. All the mages could do was search for clues day in and day out under utmost secrecy.

Oscar tapped his fingers against his chin. "I know. What if we use Akashia to cut me? And then heal me immediately."

"Y-Your Highness, that would be much too..."

"I'll go ask if I can borrow it."

"Wait!" the man protested, but Oscar turned and raced from the room. He came out onto the hallway and looked left and right. Glancing back, he didn't sense Kumu chasing after him.

The world was silent.

There were no changes. Nothing new.

Oscar went up to the next door and opened it without waiting. Inside, he found the training grounds on the castle periphery. A gray-haired general spotted him and bowed. Checking to be sure he had the practice sword belted at his waist, Oscar walked over to the man. The sword was already adult sized.

"Ettard, I want you to run me through some more drills today," Oscar said.

"I'm afraid there's no longer anything I can teach you," replied the old man.

"Don't be ridiculous. Spar with me."

"Very well, Your Highness," the general agreed, giving a deep bow. He stepped to one side and readied his sword. With a smile at Oscar, he said, "Next year or the year after, a new apprentice will come to train under me. His name is Als and he's four years younger than you... He's quite proficient."

"I look forward to meeting him," Oscar responded. Lazar was lousy with a blade, so he welcomed anyone capable and close to his age.

But for the moment, he preferred to focus on his practice. Readying his blade, he let out a long breath and concentrated.

It was growing difficult to keep track of all the rooms. Inside each, Oscar was always a child.

Once he entered a chamber, he forgot everything and thought that was where he was meant to be.

Yet when he left the room, a strange, impatient feeling washed over him.

There was no end to it.

No matter how many doors Oscar tried, he was never older than fifteen. He couldn't view any of his adult memories.

I want to get out, something deep inside him cried. There were things like alarm bells ringing within him, but they weren't loud enough for him to

be conscious of their noise. He was only capable of opening doors and going into rooms.

Oscar continued into a new chamber. What he saw there petrified him for a moment.

It looked like a room in the castle. Blood stained the walls and floor, dirtying every surface. The furniture was thrown all over like a storm had swept through.

But what drew his eye the most was a woman on the ground near the center of the chamber. She was lying facedown in a pool of red.

Oscar couldn't make out her face, but her chestnut brown hair was fanned out, soaking into the blood.

Looking down at her, he was seized with an indescribable fright.

I have to make sure.

He took a step closer, but for whatever reason, he was back in the hallway.

Oscar puzzled over the development. After a moment, however, he could no longer recall the crimson-soaked room or the woman.

He touched the next door. The faintest shock ran through his hand, but he pushed it open anyway. Inside was an unfamiliar chamber, one he couldn't place at all.

It was empty, save for a wide bed, a desk, a sizable bookcase, a sofa, and a table. A stack of thick books rested atop the desk. When he walked over to them, he saw they were all volumes on magic.

Suddenly, the clear voice of a young girl came from behind him. "Oscar? What is it?"

He turned around to see a lovely girl with long black hair standing there. She was thin and had a sweet face. He stared warily at her fine, achingly perfect features.

Curiously, he didn't know her name or how to respond to her. She came right up to him and met his gaze. "Is it time for our practice already? Am I late?"

When she said *practice*, he glanced down at his waist and found that, sure enough, he was wearing his training sword. When he looked back over at her, she was on her tiptoes and about to touch him. Her snow-white hand didn't make contact with his face, though. Softly, she floated up into the air. From a little above him, she inspected his expression, her deep, dark eyes staring into his. She brought her lips to his ear and whispered, "Oscar... open the door to the next room..."

A jolt ran up his spine.

The words held a seductive lilt to them. They'd clearly been spoken by a woman, not a girl. Shocked, Oscar took a step back.

Evidently oblivious, the girl regarded him curiously, as if she had said nothing at all. "I'm going on ahead," she stated with a smile and a wave, disappearing.

Oscar exited the unfamiliar chamber and realized he was standing before the door to the next room. He had a sense that something inexplicable had happened moments ago, but he couldn't quite recall what.

He opened the door, getting déjà vu from the zap that ran through his hand. Inside was a large hall built of stone.

It was dark, not unlike a nightmare. People were sitting in tiered rows of seats that lined the walls of the oval-shaped space. In the center of it rose a staircase, reaching a full story above the ground. Because of the angle, he couldn't see what was at the top of it, but he could hear muffled voices talking.

He decided to head for the staircase, but the woman spoke again in his ear. "Oscar... get out Akashia..."

There was no one there when he whirled to check. He fumbled at his waist for the sword and touched a hilt he was well acquainted with. This was his beloved weapon, the only one like it in the world.

I feel like I haven't held it in years.

He went to unsheathe the royal sword, but while he still had his hand wrapped around the handle, a girl's shriek came from the platform. It was so bloodcurdling that Oscar raced for the stairs.

Once again, a voice called in his ear, "Wait... Draw Akashia..."

"But..."

"It's all right. Draw Akashia, Oscar."

The words were faint, but insistent, and Oscar stopped in his tracks. In his moment of hesitation, he could hear the girl screaming and sobbing from the altar. Multiple voices spoke incantations over her heartbroken cries.

The woman's voice held him strong, however, drowning out all else. "It's all right. Trust me."

Her words were sure and firm, thrumming with a distinct force. Instinctively, he gasped.

Believing in her, he drew out his blade.

※

When he opened his eyes, a woman was staring at him from very nearby.

He couldn't immediately recall her name. But her face was very familiar, and she relaxed in relief upon seeing him wake.

Drops of blood dotted her cheeks. He reached out to wipe them away with his thumb. Her name fell naturally from his mouth. "Tinasha..."

"He woke up?" another woman spat. "Ludicrous. No one should have been able to overwrite my spell."

Her disgusted voice made Oscar's head pound. Slowly, he sat up from Tinasha's lap. Looking around, he saw he was in the audience chamber where he'd battled the witch. At some point, a magical barrier had been

erected around the whole room. Beyond it were Kevin, Lazar, Als, and his other advisers, gazing at him sorrowfully.

In the center of the chamber stood another, semicircular barrier enclosing Oscar and Tinasha. He was shocked to find two spirits collapsed nearby. A closer look revealed that Tinasha's own blood colored her white clothing.

Despite her injuries, she flashed him a bewitching smile, as though she felt no pain at all. To the witch, she replied, "I can't overwrite it, but I can *use* it. I introduced a dream of my own."

"But it only shows dreams from childhood."

"Which is why it was a dream from my childhood."

The witch eyed Tinasha with suspicion, but the queen declined to elaborate. She maintained the barrier and her silence.

Oscar massaged his temples. He had a fierce headache. Fragments were still rattling around.

Tinasha's eyes narrowed as she smiled at him. "Can you fight?"

"Of course."

"Then I'll need you to, as I don't think I can move. I've closed up your wounds."

"Okay," he replied, and he got to his feet while checking to make sure he was holding Akashia. Oscar faced the witch and looked her over.

He saw another woman's face in her sharp beauty.

The same green eyes, a regal nose, and a soft smile on her rosebud mouth. It was the face of his mother, the one he hadn't been able to recall until that moment.

"So you're my grandmother, huh? You do look like her," he remarked.

The witch said nothing, and Oscar snorted.

Feeling the weight of his sword in his hands, he stepped outside the barrier.

※

The room was an ocean of blood. Crimson had been splattered all across the walls, gleaming as it dripped.

A huge pool of blood had formed on the floor, and a woman was lying facedown in the middle of it.

Her face wasn't visible.

But he knew who she was.

※

When Oscar exited the barrier, the witch tossed him a scornful look. A spell coalesced in her right hand. "If only you'd just kept sleeping. You'd be so much happier."

"It would be pointless for me to be the only happy one," Oscar countered.

"Aggravating child."

"Lavinia! Wait!" shouted Kevin. A never-before-seen look of desperation on his face, the former king appealed to the witch. "My son has done nothing wrong! If you have to kill someone, take me—"

"It's not a matter of wrongs. If it were, then my fool of a daughter would be most to blame," Lavinia retorted, then returned her gaze to Oscar. She extended her bespelled hand toward him, and the finely wrought magic followed. "You must die and balance out the fate that was altered."

With that, she let the spell fly. A high wall of flames hemmed Oscar in. The temperature in the room soared, and Oscar's lungs struggled to breathe in the scorching air.

From behind him, a woman said anxiously, "Oscar..."

"I'll be fine."

Oscar focused his mind. Taking a deep breath in and releasing it slowly, he visualized the spell within the flames. When the core became clear, he took a step toward it. Defying the waves of heat that every instinct told him to retreat from, he thrust Akashia into the heart of the fire.

The threads snapped.

Oscar pulled Akashia back, then did a lengthwise sweep to unbind the spell.

Searing winds blew his hair back.

The walls of flame disintegrated. Fire scattered across the room, struck Tinasha's barrier, and vanished, leaving only scorching gusts.

※

The night was cloudy. Lights made of magic glowed at the corners of the room.

Unable to sleep for whatever reason, the child got out of bed. From the corner of his eye, he saw something flash past his windowpane outside.

Wondering what it was, he approached the balcony door. Then he recalled his mother's warning.

"Do not open the windows or go outside."

However, the boy spied a blue bird alighting on the balcony railing outside. The shade of its feathers was a deeper than the sky, vivid and striking, despite the clouds that covered the moon.

Is this what color the ocean is?

Excited over the idea of a vista he had never seen before, the boy rushed to undo the lock and push the door open. He came out onto the balcony and reached for the bird.

The little animal cocked its head. Its beady black eyes reflected nothing at all.

It didn't look like it was going to fly away. He could almost touch it.

"Oscar!" someone shrieked at his back.

The boy jumped. Turning, he saw his mother in the doorway. The light behind her cast shadows across her face.

Gazing at the little boy, the blue bird let out a loud cackle.

※

Oscar swung Akashia at the swords bearing down on him from all directions, shattering them to pieces.

He couldn't dodge every blade, though, and some grazed his flesh. Still, he made sure to smash any that would have fatally wounded him. Despite her exhaustion, his fiancée was doing what she could to help. Oscar spared a thought of gratitude for her while he closed in on the witch.

Sneering, Oscar asked Lavinia, "So I have to die? Is that why you cursed me?"

"It is. If you're going to hate anyone, hate your mother," she replied coldly. There was no emotion in her tone.

Several invisible vines snaked toward the young king, weaving between the swords. A strike from Akashia ended their encroachment. Oscar evaded the floating blades by leaping to the right, lopping off a vine curling around his ankle as he did. Next, he used his free hand to grab the hilt of a dagger before it could run through his left flank, then used that to parry away a sword speeding for him. Dodging the vines, he hurried toward their spell core.

As Akashia pierced and dispersed the magic, Lavinia declared, "The harder you fight, the more you'll suffer."

Immediately afterward, huge white claws appeared before Oscar—too close to evade.

Just as they had on that night, the white nails glimmered as they dived for his shoulder.

"No," Oscar whispered as he caught hold of them before they could sink into his flesh.

These aren't claws or nails. It's just a dagger.

He hurled it away.

Ultimately, the claws had never reached him.

Instead, they'd ripped into his mother, who had thrown herself before him.

※

The nails tore into her shoulder and rent her body apart.

Although her face was racked with terrible pain, she wove a spell. Wrenching herself free of the claws, she flung them at the bird demon.

It flicked the red-tipped things away. Fresh blood stained the walls.

The moon peeked out from the clouds. Pallid, tranquil light shone into the room.

Numbly, Oscar stared down at his mother, prostrate on the floor, and timidly reached for her blood-soaked back. "Mother?"

Before he could touch her, the woman's body vanished.

So did all the stains on the walls. All that remained was a shredded blue bird lying on the balcony.

Oscar flew out of the room, screaming, and made straight for his mother's chamber.

It had to be a nightmare. It *had* to be.

When he burst in... his mother was there, reading, and regarded him with surprise. "What is it, Oscar?"

Her smile was gentle. She looked just the same as ever.

Relieved, Oscar flew into her arms. Between his sobs, he told her about the dream.

I knew it. It couldn't be real.

That night, he slept in his mother's bed. That should have been the end of it.

But the next night, he was faced with the sight of his mother's death, exactly as it had been in his nightmare.

※

Akashia raised, Oscar approached the witch cautiously. Lavinia merely teleported away and reappeared near the door to the audience chamber, however.

Dodging the remaining swords, Oscar turned and gave her a strained look. "I'm not going to hate my mother. She protected me."

At that, Kevin and Lavinia both made shocked expressions. As she healed her spirits, Tinasha looked between them in confusion.

"You recall it now?" Kevin asked.

"Thanks to those dreams just now, yeah. Are you the one who sealed my memories?" Oscar turned to Lavinia, who didn't offer any denial. She gazed evenly at the young king of Farsas.

What ghastly memories. At such a young age, Oscar had watched his mother die twice. Fearing that he would be psychologically scarred if he had to carry that around with him forever, the witch had sealed his recollection of the experience when she'd cursed him.

As Oscar wrestled with the bitter memories that had been lost for fifteen years, he stared his grandmother—the witch—dead in the eye.

His dead mother, a rash of missing child cases, and an heirloom that could reverse the flow of time.

Once he fit together all the pieces, an answer emerged.

"My mother... went back in time to save me?"

Tinasha gasped.

Oscar's memory of his mother getting ripped apart by a demon had been shut away. When he thought on it, he realized that the mother in that memory was another Rosalia who'd come rushing in from a day in the future. No one ever knew at the time that there'd been two queens in the castle.

Fifteen years ago, Oscar's mother had burst into his room after traveling from the future, knowing that he was going to be attacked.

And in her attempt to save her son, she and the demon perished at the other's hand. She'd bled out and collapsed, only for her blood and corpse to disappear instantly—because she belonged to another time.

Oscar had burst into tears when she'd vanished and had run to his mother's room to find her as she'd ever been, ready to welcome him. Her reaction was understandable, since that was the woman from the present.

Relieved, Oscar believed the gruesome death to be a nightmare, but that was wrong. Only a day later, his mother perished in a puddle of her own blood.

Lavinia took a deep breath. Her green eyes moved back and forth rapidly, as if she were recalling something from long ago. "Do you remember when you told me that your dream turned into reality?"

"I do," Oscar answered.

"You were the one who was supposed to die. You became the latest target of the demon that had been taking children. But Rosalia... she couldn't bear it. She committed the sin of distorting the past."

The queen had used the magic orb and gone back in time to save her son.

And she had certainly succeeded, but her dying in the process complicated matters.

"One may succeed in altering the past, but this cannot erase the doom of a person who uses the orb, because it is no longer part of the past. The end of my daughter's life was determined when she and the demon killed each other. Her time had come, and she met it unaware. As a result, my daughter saved your life... and killed your heart."

Rosalia's end was sudden, something she couldn't have known until seconds before it happened.

But that simply meant her days were over. Eleterria was not capable of altering the fate of its user. When a person reached their appointed time of death, the same end would come to them, no matter what.

The child disappearances that had left Farsas terrorized came to a sudden end. Lavinia flew to the castle upon hearing of her daughter's suspicious demise. Once she learned of her traumatized grandson's story and that children were no longer vanishing, she deduced what had occurred.

"You've done nothing wrong, and I do not hate you. However, you are someone who should not be alive. And so you should not beget any descendants."

From a modicum of mercy, Lavinia had utilized a curse instead of killing him. She had wanted to honor her daughter's wishes, but also... she had felt sorry for Oscar.

However, he was no longer a child. He possessed his own will and he stood before her, armed with a sword.

He could move past his mother's death.

Thus, Lavinia believed it was time to correct things.

Oscar stared the witch down.

There was no doubting that his mother and grandmother had saved him. If his memories hadn't been sealed away, he wouldn't have grown into the man he was. For that fact, he was truly grateful.

He thought of his mother. His emotions there ran deeper than mere gratitude. He wondered if this was how Tinasha had felt when she'd gone into magical hibernation.

Oscar held Akashia steady. He could see the witch was casting a massive spell. One corner of his lips curled in a smirk. "You might be here seeking retribution for my mother's actions, but I'm still your enemy. I'm guilty of the same crime she committed, after all."

While he didn't remember that, Tinasha did.

He was standing here at the intersection of their intertwined destinies.

Lavinia frowned, puzzled. Her green eyes flicked over to Tinasha, seated on the floor. After a few seconds, those eyes grew wide with horror.

"The Witch Killer... No, it can't be... What you put in his dream was..."

No one in all the land surpassed Lavinia when it came to curses.

That was why she had believed nothing could break through hers. Nothing except for the sword capable of killing witches, anyway.

To prevent Akashia from interfering, as it may have had power even in a dream, Lavinia had purposely only shown Oscar dreams of his childhood, from before he took possession of Akashia.

But ultimately, he had undone the spell himself and stood before her—through the help of the queen who'd overlaid Oscar's dreams with her own.

"So that's... how you did it."

Lavinia had heard that the queen who once slew a witch had used magic to put herself to sleep—and that she was the recently crowned ruler of Tuldarr in the present day.

What had woken her up? Why had she gotten engaged to him?

The answers to questions Lavinia had never thought to ask now became abundantly obvious.

"You utter, *utter* fools!"

She shook all over with rage. A devastating spell materialized before her. Glittering a brilliant green, it swelled with innumerable swords that formed a gigantic net rushing at Oscar.

Tinasha cried in warning, "Oscar!"

"I remember," he said. With a diagonal lunge, he swept Akashia out at the spell.

During training, Tinasha had cast a similar spell at him. She told him that if he didn't break all of its multiple cores at once, it would repair itself.

He could see seven such spots. As he shattered blade after blade that shot from the magic, Oscar swung Akashia aloft and aimed right for the cores.

He exhaled slowly, but his mind raced.

Two, three, four... In his head, he counted the cores he'd destroyed.

When he broke the fifth one, pain shot through his right arm.

One of the witch's swords had made contact. Blood dripped onto the floor.

Akashia's tip narrowly managed to pierce the sixth core. Oscar stretched as far as he could go, and yet he couldn't reach the seventh.

The shattered cores began to regenerate. Swords rushed at him from all directions.

Just as defeat seemed inevitable, the seventh core broke.

Tinasha had done it.

The net dissolved in midair and vanished. With a loud clattering, all the ensorcelled blades fell to the ground.

The witch stared at her daughter's son. Hatred burned in her eyes, but there was a recognizable hollowness there. "Why are you adding to your crimes? Has it not occurred to you that your actions may have shifted things beyond your intention?"

"The person I am now can't answer that. But..." Oscar could sense the woman behind him. His fondness for her brought a smile to his lips. "If she's in pain and I can reach her, I'm going to go to her no matter what transpires. I will *never* abandon her... Too much has happened already."

A girl's anguished scream—from the dream he'd witnessed—flashed through the back of his mind.

Oscar had no way of knowing whether that had really happened or if it was something that had been prevented.

Yet when he recalled that shriek, it raked at his soul. If she were ever in that situation again, he wouldn't be able to sit idly by, even if Tinasha had told him to.

Oscar approached the witch, who did nothing to stop him. She only stared with those green eyes.

He adjusted his grip on his sword, gazing into the face of the woman who so resembled his mother. Step by step, he closed the gap between them. "Whether I altered the past or it was changed some other way, we are in the present, and that's why I have to fight you. I have no desire to lose all I've gained."

"Even if it means warping the very fabric of our world?"

"Should it come to that, I'll still keep moving forward from where I am. I have no other place," Oscar said with a grin. After all, there would be no end to the corrections once one or two were made.

Lavinia looked her grandchild up and down. Her clear eyes were a bit reminiscent of Tinasha's. Oscar stood before the witch now with the strength of will he had accrued over his life. He lifted Akashia high and leveled the tip at the witch's slender throat.

"I know how this looks... but I don't want you to die. Maybe that's just wishful thinking, though. I do tend to try having it all."

The witch sneered. "It certainly seems that way... How frightfully greedy you are. It wasn't enough to have the curse broken? You needed the mage who did it, too?"

"It was your magic that brought her to me. Perhaps I should be thanking you," Oscar shot back.

The witch lifted one eyebrow. She glanced over Oscar's shoulder at Tinasha. "She's not much different from a witch herself. Should the two of you have a daughter, she would more than likely become a witch. Is it worth marrying her in spite of that?"

"It is," Oscar replied immediately. Then he broke into a pleased smile. "A witch kid, huh? Bring it on. I'd love to raise one."

Lavinia's cold mask dissolved into a completely aghast expression. She turned over her shoulder to throw Kevin, beyond the barrier, a look of horror. "Did *you* raise him to be like this?"

"For better or worse, this is my son..."

Kevin's apologetic response made the witch heave a deep sigh. She gazed at Kevin, then Tinasha, and then finally Oscar. Her lips quirked up in a sardonic smile. "Someday you might regret not killing me today. Have you thought of that?"

"I can always do it later," Oscar shot back flippantly.

For the first time, the witch burst out laughing. Abruptly, she teleported to a spot in the air. "Do as you like, then. However..."

Her green eyes narrowed to slits. An all-encompassing, intimidating aura dominated the room. "You are not to engage in any more foolishness. The time of reckoning may draw near."

"I'll bear that in mind," Oscar replied.

A terribly heartrending look came over Lavinia's face as she stared down at him.

Perhaps that was Oscar's eyes playing tricks on him, though, as the witch vanished in the blink of an eye.

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When Tinasha woke, it was the middle of the night.

Blinking over and over in the darkness from her position lying on her stomach in bed, she sifted through her memories. Yet no matter how she tried, she couldn't recall what happened after the witch vanished. Perhaps her body hadn't been able to endure the stress of back-to-back fights. She still felt somewhat nauseated.

In the lightless room, she slowly pushed herself up. Next to her, Oscar appeared to notice and blinked his eyes open. "Tinasha?"

"Uh... good morning..."

"It is *not* morning. That much should be obvious," he muttered, rising to sit beside the young queen. He scanned her face. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine. Just a little tired..." she answered, trailing off as she looked down at what she was wearing. Puzzled, she asked, "Did I change clothes? Mine had blood all over them. I do remember healing my injuries, though."

"I gave you a bath and changed your clothes. It was fun."

"..."

"Just kidding. The lady-in-waiting did it."

"You are *not* funny," Tinasha pouted, cheeks puffing out. It was strange enough for her to find herself asleep in bed next to him like it was the most natural thing in the world. Oscar must not have wanted to let her out of his sight, considering the wave of recent incidents, but she still wasn't thrilled about that, engaged or not.

After a deeply amused Oscar was done laughing, he carded a hand through his fiancée's hair, stroking it. "Sorry for dragging you into a bitter fight."

She smiled. Lazar had escaped from the audience chamber, found Kevin along the way and explained that Lavinia was there, then had run to get Tinasha. By the time he did, Oscar was already caught in the witch's binding spell. Tinasha had gotten between Oscar, bleeding and collapsed on the floor, and had found the witch staring down at him silently. After erecting a barrier, she slipped her consciousness into the spell on Oscar while battling Lavinia.

Tinasha said, "She was stronger than the witch I fought a long time ago. To be quite honest, I probably would have lost even if my focus hadn't been split."

"She's really that powerful?" Oscar asked.

And yet even so, it had looked like the witch was going easy on him during their battle. Oscar was struck with new awe over the fearsome power some mages possessed.

Tinasha gave an unhappy shrug. "Also, remind me never to fight you. I couldn't bear to have you break all my spells like it's nothing. It would be a waste of magic just to cast them."

"Oh yeah? It wasn't a walk in the park for me, either. I'd be dead if not for your help," he pointed out.

"Only because you were up against a witch. We were lucky to break you out of the binding spell," she said dryly.

That made Oscar recall the girl from the dream. He wound a hand through Tinasha's locks and gave her hair a tug. "So that was your memory? You were pretty cute."

"That's very embarrassing. Please don't say that," she replied, most likely flushing, although Oscar couldn't make out Tinasha's face in the darkness. She had definitely turned her head aside, and Oscar grinned.

While none of it was new information, he now knew with certainty that he was the one who had rescued her four hundred years ago. He wouldn't have been present in one of her adolescent memories otherwise.

Thinking of the sobbing he'd heard, Oscar wanted to ask Tinasha precisely what had transpired, but he held his tongue. It was in the past. He didn't need to force an explanation. If he ever needed to know someday, she would tell him.

"Tinasha, I'm sorry."

"What? What for?"

"For what happened four centuries ago."

"Huh?!" she yelped. Dark, wide eyes stared at him. "Why would you apologize for that? Did you do something?"

"No... It's just that, don't you feel something besides gratitude to him? Or to me, or to whomever? You must be angry, too. Maybe you want to know why I rewrote the past or why I disappeared afterward."

Those were things Oscar desired answers to himself.

He was grateful beyond words that his mother had saved him. However, it also made him sick to his stomach that she committed a taboo to do so, and that it had cost her own life. If only she hadn't gone to such lengths, she would still be alive. Perhaps she should have thought of herself, too. He loved her, and he wanted her to honor that tenderness.

Regretfully, Oscar could never tell that to the woman who saved him.

It was different for Tinasha, though. She had him.

"I don't have my memories, but I'm still me. It's been bothering you this whole time, right? I'm sorry for that."

"You don't have to be..."

Tinasha gazed back at Oscar, a pained look on her face. Fierce pain and emotion ran deep in her eyes.

After a long, slow blink, Tinasha flushed a little. "I lived a very sheltered life until I was thirteen years old. I was brought to the palace soon after I was born, and raised to be queen one day... The only family I had to speak of was another person raised as a potential king. But even though he was like a brother to me, he chose to side against me."

The words came calmly and evenly from Tinasha's lips. This was the first time Oscar had heard any of this.

She glanced out the window, and her expression grew visibly nostalgic. "And then *he* came and taught me so many things. The days I spent with him were so happy. He didn't just save my life... He gave me the love I needed to live alone from that point on."

Tinasha's deep, abiding affection for him bled through in her voice. When Oscar heard it, he could tell how much love the man who'd saved her had given her. In exchange for everything he had, he'd rewritten history to

rescue her. That emotion was far too all-encompassing. The mere memory of it had brought Tinasha four hundred years into the future.

"But when I arrived here to repay my debt, you were so mean to me. I did this all for you, but you treated me rudely, kept your distance because I was from a different country, acted like you were so innocent all while harping on me about everything—"

"Hey. Don't you think that's a bit much?" Oscar huffed.

"Yet I love how you never waver in who you are. You're the one I want to be with now," Tinasha confessed, glancing at him with a shy smile. It was entrancing.

A match between a tolerant king and a queen consort who swore eternal love and loyalty wasn't unheard of, but that wasn't who these two were. They faced each other as rulers of their own countries in equal right; at times they set boundaries and at others they butted heads. Still, they had chosen each other.

Some might have felt constrained by not having the freedom to choose anything but a life like that. Oscar and Tinasha, however, had long since accepted that it was impossible to separate their personalities from their royal identities.

Which was exactly why simply being together, laughing with each other, was so precious to them. They would be able to spend the days to come at each other's sides.

Tinasha took Oscar's hand in hers. She intertwined her much smaller, paler fingers within his, brought their joined hands to her cheek, and beamed brilliantly. "I am very happy now. Thank you."

Such was her warm and utterly unguarded affection for him. Oscar found himself breathless in the face of her smile that enchanted his soul.

Without moving their joined hands, Oscar leaned in to press a gentle kiss to her soft lips.

If only they could communicate wordlessly.

He wanted her to know the feelings he was helpless to define.

It was difficult to tell if it was his body or soul that felt so hot.

Oscar pulled away and gazed into her dark eyes. "You have saved me."

His reverent words made her dimple with happiness. It was exactly that look on her face that captivated him so thoroughly. He slid their joined hands down slowly, from her cheekbones to her mouth. As her eyes went half-lidded, he drew her close and kissed her again. Holding her upright as she went limp in his arms, he brought his lips to her ear.

"Are you hesitating because you want to preserve your magic?" he asked, somewhat wryly.

She knew what he meant right away. Contritely, she replied, "Could you tell?"

"You *are* a spirit sorcerer and all. Of course you'd be worried about that," Oscar said a little bitterly as he drew back. Tinasha sighed; he was right about why she refused to go further with him.

Spirit sorcerers weakened upon losing their chastity.

Tinasha had access to more than just her spiritual magic, of course, but she did also tend to rely upon such singular and powerful magic. Should she lose her chastity now, it would require much more power to cast many of her spells.

That said, Tinasha knew that she could not remain in this state forever. In a year, she would marry into Farsas and become its queen.

However, considering the mistakes and defeats she had suffered in the half a year since she'd awakened, she was very reluctant to do anything that would diminish her strength. The thought of not having enough during an emergency was sobering. Still, she did think herself weak for feeling that way, considering she had power enough to stand far above ordinary mages.

Despite knowing all that, she still felt hesitant.

To distract Tinasha from her gloomy thoughts, Oscar cupped her face in his hands and tipped it up. "I know how it sounds to ask that of you after you've rescued me time and time again. No matter how weak you get, even if you can no longer use magic, I'll keep you safe. I will give you back everything that you'll be losing."

"Oscar..."

Her hot breath tickled his skin.

Every single time she was with him, she felt heat within her rise—everything from a mind-searing fever to warmth that made her want to cry. He was the one who gave her more power than she needed, and he was also the one who made her believe in herself.

Before any tears could slip out, Oscar kissed Tinasha's eyelids and grinned. "Well, you don't need to worry about it now. We've got less than a year to go and it's not like I can't wait that long. Plus, knowing our luck, we may need your strength again in the months before the wedding. So I'll honor your wishes. I'm fine with whatever you want to do."

He sounded so easygoing that Tinasha couldn't help breaking into a grin of her own.

Just as she had done when they first met underneath the palace of Tuldarr, she wound her arms around his neck and leaned against him. "I'm going to be the one to protect you."

Tinasha had chosen her fate, no matter what was in store for them.

Never again would she lose anything to anyone. She would not expose such weakness to him.

Believing that thought to hold a power of its own, she closed her eyes.

■ 8. Finding a Seed

She awakened.

Not inside a physical body, but as a conceptual entity.

Still, she was awake.

She took a breath, came to life, and sifted through the records.

She wanted one person alone.

And so she began to create a consciousness in accordance with her own specifications that would reveal her beautiful form to the world.

※

Through the window, morning light filtered into the spacious chamber.

Oscar lifted his head, feeling as if he could hear birds chirping, though he shouldn't have been able to. Glancing at the clock, he saw it was his usual waking hour. He felt a little malaise, owing to the battle the day before, but he thought he would be fine if that was the extent of it.

Sitting up, he looked over to see Tinasha curled in a ball, hugging her knees to her chest.

"What's with the fetal position?" he muttered in disbelief, then gave her black hair a tug. As he'd expected, gentle tugs weren't enough for her to even stir. He was left with no choice but to place a hand on her shoulder and shake her awake.

She blinked her dark eyes open blearily, swiveling her head to look up at him. "Sleepy...?"

"So... once we're married, I'm going to have to wake you up every morning for the rest of my life?" Oscar asked, sounding partially resigned to that fate already. In that interim, Tinasha had already closed her eyes again.

Oscar had half a mind to wake her up one more time, but then he realized something and placed a hand against her forehead. His eyes widened a little, and he clicked his tongue under his breath. Leaving her in bed, he got up to start his day.

※

The royal magistrates who had been in the audience chamber during the witch's attack were now privy to the truth about the king's mother, but they'd struggled to make sense of it all.

Fortunately, Kumu and Als had cleared most people out ahead of time, so the only ones who learned the truth were those who'd already known about the curse. Even so, none of them had ever expected to discover that the previous king had married a witch's daughter.

Oscar had given a cursory explanation of Eleterria to all who'd witnessed the incident once it had resolved, and also had informed them that there were people after the orbs. Kevin, Oscar's father, had heard about Eleterria from his wife, so he was only mildly surprised to learn there was a second orb in Tuldarr. As Oscar had privately suspected, his father didn't know much about the orbs.

Entirely of her own accord, his mother had taken Eleterria out from Lavinia's personal collection. He thought about tracking Lavinia down to hear more details, but that seemed like it might be pouring oil on a fire they had only barely managed to extinguish. He also didn't know where the witch lived.

Thus, it seemed that the trail had gone cold. Oscar had learned about his past, which left him feeling like some weight had been lifted from his shoulders, but that was all.

Now that a day had passed since Lavinia's visit, things seemed to have settled down, and Oscar's usual routine resumed. He made for his study to begin his regular duties.

As he brewed tea, Lazar let out a sigh. "It's just been one surprise after another around here..."

"Yeah, it was a real shocker," Oscar remarked sarcastically.

Lazar made a face at the king's insincere reply.

All the magistrates knew that the previous king had married his queen in spite of considerable opposition from her family, but no one had imagined she was the child of a witch.

Resting his chin on one hand, Oscar took up a pen with the other. "It makes sense that Lavinia disliked it. I kinda doubt she was thrilled to see her own daughter marry into the line that wields the Mage Killer."

"Were Queen Tinasha's parents alive and well today, they might object to your wedding her, too," mused Lazar.

After that, Lazar brought up a number of topics, but he did not ask about Oscar using Eleterria to make contact with Tinasha in the past. A perceptive person could probably have figured it out, but anyone who didn't look too closely wouldn't suspect much. Oscar thought Lazar was more of the latter type.

A handful of papers in his arms, Lazar cocked his head. "By the way, has Queen Tinasha returned home?"

"No, she caught a bit of a fever, so I put her on bed rest. A lady-in-waiting is watching her."

"Your Majesty... you're unbelievable," commented Lazar, shock plain in his expression.

"I didn't do anything. Don't look at me like that," Oscar said with a frown. "She woke up for a bit in the middle of the night but went right back to sleep. I think that fight really wore her out."

"Ah... that's understandable. She did look like she was struggling yesterday," Lazar responded.

After battling forbidden curses, kidnappers, and witches, it was no wonder Tinasha was fast approaching her physical limits. The king of Farsas was in the same boat himself and yet able to carry out his duties just fine, which spoke to the vast disparity between her delicate body and his sturdier one.

"If her fever still hasn't gone down by this afternoon, I'll contact Tuldarr," Oscar stated.

"Very well, Your Majesty. Oh yes! Here is the attendance list for international guests for this year's birthday celebration," said Lazar, presenting Oscar with another paper.

Upon receiving it and looking it over, Oscar grimaced. "What a pain..."

"And you may *not* cancel it! Give up on that right now, as this will double as your engagement party!"

"..."

Beaten to the punch by his oldest friend, Oscar stared up at the ceiling and sighed.

※

Tinasha woke up in the afternoon. Her sickness was born from exhaustion, which was in turn linked to her magic. Rest cured her fever, and while she wasn't fully recovered, she felt well enough to get up.

First, she took a bath and changed her clothes, aided by a lady-in-waiting. Then she ordered everyone to leave the room and sat on the bed, closing her eyes as she explored the state of the magic in her body.

Her vast reserves of power were currently still, like a calm sea. After ensuring she could control the entirety of it, she frowned. "I'm glad I didn't explode."

When taking in Simila's energy, Tinasha had feared a worst-case scenario from magic oversaturation. Fortunately, the new power she'd absorbed was assimilated without issue. The raw magic she had at her disposal surely rivaled Travis's or Lavinia's now.

That notion provided little comfort when she recalled the battle from yesterday. It was a good thing that Oscar had been there. She wasn't certain who would've won had she clashed with the witch alone. Tinasha's access to spiritual magic hadn't prevented the witch, whose full command of curses and hexes was second to none, from rendering her and Oscar powerless instantly.

But in a way, she was also grateful for the opportunity to assess the difference in strength.

Tinasha was always keen to battle against someone superior and learn from the experience. Her fight with Travis had sharpened all of her senses. There was still raw potential within her that she wanted to mold.

A spell formed between Tinasha's outstretched arms. As she examined the intricate design, she detected a presence nearby and looked up.

A woman was standing on the balcony. Tinasha had only met her yesterday but would never forget her face.

After some hesitation, Tinasha got up and opened the balcony door, inviting the uninvited guest inside.

Tilting her head to one side to fix Tinasha with a blank look, the woman said, "You're awfully careless, letting me in after what happened yesterday."

"Yes, but you seem like you have something to say," Tinasha replied, eyeing the Witch of Silence right back.

"I'm sure this goes without saying, but that orb should be sealed away," the witch stated.

"You're right... and I'll propose as much. While I have you, why didn't you take the orb back from Farsas when you cast the curse on Oscar?" Tinasha inquired.

"Because I didn't know where it was, and I didn't feel like searching for it. But since that fool of a man used it, I take it that means you know where it is?"

Tinasha almost lost her temper over Lavinia's rude term of address for Oscar, but she managed to keep herself composed. "I've heard it's in the treasure vault. However, he used the Tuldarr one. Apparently, it's a different color from the Farsas one, so they're definitely separate."

"The... one in Tuldarr? There's another one?"

The two women exchanged glances. Tinasha was adequately surprised, but Lavinia looked utterly taken aback.

This might be a good opportunity to learn more.

Tinasha got straight to the point. "How much do you know about that orb?"

"I could ask you the same thing. I got it from a traveling fortune-teller somewhere around two hundred years ago. I was told it was a magic implement that could change the past, if the wielder was determined to do so."

"Determined to do so...," Tinasha repeated.

That described it perfectly. The orb truly did test the user's determination. The present was wiped clean for the sake of the past, and there was no guarantee of success. It was a gamble that risked the user's very existence.

Wondering if there was more Lavinia would share, Tinasha voiced a doubt she had been harboring for a while. "We know that using the orb puts

the user in considerable danger. But what about other ramifications? Does the backlash and distortion from altering time manifest in obvious ways? Are the laws of nature and the existence of the world affected?"

"From the perspective of someone watching before time is altered, using the orb would seem to distort every outcome. Those of us who exist after the change remain ignorant, however. Whether it infringes on the laws of nature and threatens the world's existence can only be determined after the dust settles. At the very least, we cannot be aware of anything in the present moment," Lavinia answered.

"I suppose that's... true," Tinasha replied softly.

There was no way to verify the specific consequences that might spring from rewriting history, which ultimately meant that those consequences didn't matter. Even witches were powerless to know what had changed.

"According to the fortune-teller, using the orb was the equivalent of sticking a pin into the world itself," explained Lavinia. "You could pull in a future that wouldn't exist otherwise and stick a pin in to keep it there. The fortune-teller said to think of it like the world was a dead insect with thousands of pins stuck into its legs and wings to hold it open. Even as the world tries to return to its original state, the orb responds with more pins. That's the cycle."

"A pin..."

The orb threw pins at the world as it attempted to restore itself. There was no telling how many times that cycle had repeated. And if that was the case...

Tinasha realized something, and an involuntary shiver suddenly ran through her whole body.

Would this back-and-forth go on forever? *Could* it go on forever?

How much longer could the world endure being speared through?

Tinasha had no answer, for indeed, none would come until the final outcome revealed itself. Perhaps one day, everything would abruptly disappear, and they would never know. At the very least, each use of Eleterria unceremoniously erased the world.

Before Tinasha could get too lost in such frightening thoughts, she felt Lavinia's gaze on her and looked up. It was only fair that she reveal to the witch what she knew in return.

First, there was the name itself, Eleterria. Then there was the matter of there being two orbs, and the fact that the other was kept in Tuldarr's treasure vault. Finally, after a great deal of hesitation, Tinasha also confessed that a man was seeking the powerful little spheres.

After listening with a scowl on her face the entire time, Lavinia snorted. "That's probably the man who informed me about you two. The description matches."

"What? Valt was the one who told you?"

"I'd guess it probably happened right after he let you go. His story sounded full of holes, but I did some digging and it seemed to check out, so

I came to Farsas. If only I'd had the sense to kill him back then," Lavinia said bitterly.

Tinasha blanched. Immediately after kidnapping and releasing her, Valt had set the next step of his scheme in motion. It felt as though no matter where Tinasha went, she was caught in his web. What else was Valt plotting?

After staring expressionlessly at Tinasha this whole time, Lavinia suddenly let out a sigh. Strangely enough, the action reminded Tinasha of something a mother would do.

"You'll need to be extremely careful. He's the type to use everything at his disposal," Lavinia warned.

"Thank you... for the advice."

"All right, I'm leaving," the witch announced abruptly, turning around and casting a teleportation spell.

Tinasha reached for her. "Wait!"

Irritably, Lavinia replied, "What is it?"

Tinasha looked embarrassed. "You only came to talk about the orb?"

"I did. I can't trust that idiot to take proper care of it unless I stress its importance. You need to hold the reins."

There was no emotion in Lavinia's voice, but Tinasha could still feel something prickling at her when the witch spoke—like a thorn that had been stuck in her heart. A question she had never been able to ask anyone else tumbled off her lips. Her mouth was dry as she asked, "Do you think it's a crime to change the past and sacrifice yourself to save someone else?"

After a pause, Lavinia turned around. Her emerald eyes glowed in the light. A few silent moments passed before she spoke. "No matter how much you love someone, you should not change things from how they are meant to be. You must accept the past as it was. And sacrificing yourself on top of that is even more foolhardy. You were rescued once yourself, so you should know that it is no mercy for the physical body alone to survive."

Her message was harsh, but true. Those who were saved at the expense of another's life had to live with the trauma for the rest of their lives. Haunted by regrets over losing that person, some might even seek to return to the past.

While the witch likely grieved for her daughter, she was furious with her, too.

Though it saved her son's life, Rosalia's death shattered his heart. Had Lavinia not stepped in, it could have led to even further tragedy.

Tinasha said nothing more, only giving Lavinia a bow. She had her own lifelong burdens to bear, too.

The one bit of fortune was that Tinasha didn't have to endure it alone.

After merely raising her eyebrow in response to Tinasha's silence, Lavinia said, "You broke the curse magnificently. Don't worry about the definition name. It was just a way to seal off that idiot's memories while protecting him at the same time. And those spells you cast during the

fight... During your waking years, you've grown into something more formidable than I."

"Um... thank you," Tinasha replied, feeling conflicted about such convoluted praise. She bowed again as she sensed Lavinia's teleportation spell coming together.

Tinasha blinked, and the witch was gone without so much as a good-bye.

※

Upon returning to Tuldarr later that afternoon, the queen went around apologizing to everyone who had been worried about her. She was especially humbled upon discovering that Legis and the other royal advisers had shouldered her work for the three days she'd been absent.

Legis gave a faint smile. "It's perfectly all right. How are you feeling?"

"Wonderful. I'm going to get to work," she replied.

"Absolutely not. You will take today off," he insisted, and Tinasha looked chastened.

She ordered everyone else out except for Legis and Renart and then revealed what had really happened with the kidnappings. Both were stunned to learn of a magic implement that could turn back time and the entire chain of events connected to it.

"I can't believe such a thing really exists..."

"I've sealed it away, but I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner," she said.

"No, that was a prudent decision," Legis assured her.

Tinasha had revealed to Legis that Oscar had traveled back in time. However, she'd initially withheld the method. The magic orb belonged to Tuldarr, but learning about its power right away could've provoked recklessness.

Tinasha also explained that there were people plotting to take the orb. Both she and Legis wore tense expressions as she outlined the situation to him. "Valt's proved elusive, and he seems to have everything curiously well planned out. And he's like a phantom, popping in and out of nowhere. We don't know what sort of move he'll make next, so I want you to be very careful."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Renart replied seriously and bowed to her. Then he crossed his arms as he added, "A magic orb that can leap through time to the past... That's very alarming. What would it be used for?"

"Strictly speaking, whenever someone uses it, our 'present' ceases to exist," Tinasha responded. At that, the temperature in the room seemed to drop.

Even if the user only sought a minor correction, the effects could be expansive and unpredictable. There was no predicting how the flow of time would change. While Tinasha didn't know why Eleterria hadn't activated at her touch, she regretted attempting to use it. That kind of power was not to be used lightly.

After nodding along to Tinasha's explanation, Legis suddenly caught her eye and gave her a wan smile. "I wonder what Tuldarr would be like now if things had gone differently four hundred years ago."

The question sent Tinasha's mind racing.

What if Oscar had never saved me?

Recognizing that she was losing herself to the idea, she shook her head.

※

Steps descended through a narrow rock crevice, going deep underground. A man picked his way down them quickly and carefully. He kept one hand on the wall, while the other clutched something wrapped in white cloth. The lights spaced along the wall at regular intervals cast a long, black shadow behind him.

After an eternity, at last the stairway ended. Only cold air greeted the man.

A few days earlier, this had been the gathering place for all the filth in the world. Hundreds, perhaps more, had been sacrificed here to summon an evil that would swallow everything.

Yet now there was nothing. It had emerged on the surface... and succumbed to defeat.

All that remained were the dregs.

The man stood at the entrance to the enormous cavern. As his eyes darted all around with a fervor that made him seem possessed, he hugged the warm bundle tightly to his chest.

The court of Cezar was shrouded in gloom.

Most of those who held power in the castle had perished during the country's recent defeat. The cult founder came scurrying back only to go missing, and some speculated he had been arrested in Farsas.

For those who hadn't fallen under the sway of the cult, the light at the end of the tunnel seemed to be nearing at last. The evil god's worshippers were gone. Unfortunately, there was little to celebrate, for they had lost so many of their kin.

The only ones with any power were the king, who had taken to his bed, his only son, Lomca, and a handful of magistrates. The cult had put anyone else with the drive and ambition to govern the country in the ground.

An air of resignation about Cezar's slow demise hung about the castle. Amid that backdrop, two men made their way briskly along a hallway.

One was a magistrate, while the other was the prince. These two were the youngest left in the castle, and they had waited patiently for the Samila worshippers' influence to wane.

"At any rate, we need to rebuild quickly, Your Highness," said the magistrate.

"I have no explanation I can offer the people. Most of our citizens were lost," replied the prince.

"The country has practically come to a standstill. Merchants are avoiding us. If things don't change..."

International traders had been giving the rapidly collapsing nation a wide berth. Cult members had, until recently, maintained an authoritarian regime that managed to keep the country looking respectable from the outside. That facade had since vanished, however.

Now there was no structure at all, and everything was quickly falling to pieces.

These two men walking down a hallway were the ones who strongly wished to preserve Cezar.

The prince, Lomca, rifled through the papers he was carrying. "We really don't have enough money... *They* used almost all of it. But it's not like we can raise taxes, considering the circumstances—we should probably lower them, if anything. Or better yet, send money to everyone."

Mothers and children who had lost a father conscripted into the war, elderly parents now sonless—Cezar had no end of such families, and it had no future if it couldn't save them. Lomca pursed his lips, feeling a keen sense of duty.

While his intentions were virtuous, he was at a loss when it came to concrete solutions.

The magistrate gave a defeated look. "Perhaps we should request aid somewhere."

"If need be, we can sell what's left in the treasure vault. We'll figure it out."

As they hurried along, their path was suddenly cut off by three men. Lomca gasped when he caught sight of their faces. These were the last survivors of the cult.

"That's a very interesting idea you were discussing, Your Highness. If you're clearing out treasure, by all means, let us help," one man said with a snicker.

"Get out of here! Who do you think left this country in such a mess?!" Lomca snapped.

"That isn't very convincing coming from a man who kept quiet the whole time," another one of the ruffians countered, sneering. His cohorts burst out laughing, causing Lomca to flush in anger. Yet he felt cold sweat trickle down his back at the same time. The cult members were mages, and he was powerless against them. He glanced over at the magistrate, who had gone pale. They exchanged a look.

Just when it looked like they might be able to edge past the men, they found their path blocked again. Lomca felt despair settling over him and was therefore surprised when a new voice sounded in the corridor. His words were so strong and clear that they stuck out in the gloomy castle.

"I'm here to have a chat with the people running Cezar. Is it all right with you if I clear these guys out, Prince Lomca?"

Looking over, he saw that there was a man standing behind the three mages from the cult. While Lomca had no idea who he was, he shouted to his unexpected savior, "Yes! They drove our country into the ground, and I want them gone!"

"I won't hold back, then," the unfamiliar man replied, and he struck immediately.

Just as the three men were turning around indignantly, a spell shot out from the man's hands, entangling them. Faintly glowing magic ropes offset the spells the men were about to cast and wrapped around their necks.

After a sickening crunch, the trio of lifeless bodies dropped to the floor.

Lomca had looked away instinctively. Then a cool, refreshing voice, wholly unlike the one he had just heard, said, "There. Now we can talk properly. I'll leave the corpses to you."

"Er, yes... thank you so much," Lomca answered, and he looked to the one who had rescued him.

When the man caught Lomca's eyes on him, he flashed the crest of Tuldarr emblazoned on his upper arm.

After the group moved to a room where they could talk, the man called Renart explained why he had come. Apparently, Tuldarr was interested in purchasing the mining rights to the vast crystal caves in northern Cezar.

Lomca was aware of the high-quality deposits Renart was referring to. However, the veins were close to the border with Tayiri, and the area had a history of cave-ins, so it was practically abandoned nowadays. Naturally, the Magic Empire of Tuldarr wanted the crystals for use as magic implements, but Lomca had to wonder why they were coming to Cezar now of all times.

The prince's doubt only intensified when he learned of the offered price. There on the paper Renart passed to him was a figure that rivaled the annual national budget.

Lomca blurted out, "We're very grateful, but isn't this far too much?"

"We will actually be purchasing the rights for a quarter of this amount," Renart explained. "The rest of the money will serve as collateral for the duration of the crystal mining, as the site is so close to the Tayiri border. After the excavation is complete, we'd like you to pay it back. Of course, we don't mind if that takes years."

Tuldarr and Tayiri were not on cordial terms, considering one was the Magic Empire and the other was a nation that spurned magic. During the mining process, Tuldarr citizens would be frequenting a location close to the edge of Tayiri, and so Cezar would be expected to smooth things over.

But even for all that, the figure was very high. Stranger still was that Tuldarr did not stipulate a schedule for repayment.

Lomca stared at Renart, who could surmise what that gaze meant and offered a wan smile in return.

This was all being done as a kindness on Tuldarr's part. It was a way to facilitate Cezar's reconstruction, though not openly. Upon the queen's return to Tuldarr, she had broached the subject with Legis apprehensively,

showing him her plan for providing aid. Legis had smiled and agreed with it. After all, this wasn't pure altruism. If Tayiri ever grew hostile, being able to collect on Cezar's debt would come in handy. In Legis's opinion, no price was too high to pay for that security.

"If we are in agreement, then I will bring you an official contract on a later date," said Renart.

Lomca, having read between the lines of Tuldarr's offer, stood up and bowed. "We gladly accept. And please tell the queen that we're speechless with gratitude."

Renart nodded. "I certainly will." After clarifying some points and hammering down a few details here and there, the mage narrowed his eyes. What he inquired about next was likely the true purpose of his visit. "So... could you tell us where that evil god was based? We'd like to conduct an investigation so we can all avoid any future anxiety."

Lomca and his magistrate gasped.

Upon his return, Renart went straight to the queen's study. Instead of being in her usual place at her desk, the queen was dozing on a sofa in the corner of the room while Legis handled royal paperwork for her.

Catching Renart's confused expression, Legis smiled. "She seems tired. I did want to take her back to her own rooms to sleep..."

The queen had only gotten back the day before, and while she claimed to be feeling fine, she had a low-grade fever, and her health was not at all stable. Legis had encouraged her to rest, but she had insisted on working. The current situation reflected the compromise they had reached.

Legis inclined his head with curiosity. "How did it go in Cezar?"

"They agreed readily enough. Unsurprisingly, things over there are very rough," Renart reported.

"I see. I'm glad they accepted," Legis replied. After hearing a detailed account from Renart, he began to draft an official contract to send to Cezar. Eyes still glued to his work, he inquired, "And the other thing?"

"I've gone to look at it. An enormous underground cave has been dug in a forest close to the border. A great hole sits in the center. The human sacrifices were probably thrown into it."

"What was left?"

"Nothing. It was entirely spotless. I only sensed some traces of miasma... I had a mystical spirit inspect it, too. It really seems like there's nothing left."

"Hmm..."

Another forbidden curse had been destroyed, and the news of that had doubtless spread across the continent already. If Tuldarr could establish itself as a power capable of resisting forbidden curses, perhaps that wicked magic would become a thing of the past.

Legis broke into a smile as that momentary fantasy flitted through his mind.

"That said, it felt... almost *too* spotless. It's very abnormal for there to be no residue after bringing a magical creature into existence. I believe someone may have scrubbed away the traces," added Renart.

"But for what purpose?" Legis wondered.

Renart retrieved a white cloth from his pouch. When he spread it out, it was about the size of a cloak. "I found this on the stairs down there. I think it's still fresh."

Legis frowned. "What could that possibly be? Go ahead and have it processed for potion remains."

"Yes, Your Highness," Renart replied. After a bow, he left the study.

The prince fell into deep thought for a while, mulling over this very mysterious report.

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Of the four Great Nations, Farsas and Gandona each had an annual affair to which international guests were invited as a way to foster diplomacy. For Farsas, it was a celebration for the king's birthday, while in Gandona, the festivities were to commemorate the nation's founding.

Implicit in these parties was the opportunity for those from other countries to gather, feel each other out, and build relations.

More than a week had passed since the battle with the Witch of Silence, and Tinasha was wholly recovered. She skimmed through letters from Farsas regarding the celebration to be held in two weeks' time.

She made a clear face of disgust. "This isn't an invitation; it's a set of instructions. I feel more like a member of the Farsas side than a guest."

"Isn't he going to introduce you to everyone as his fiancée?" Mila reminded her, sipping tea at the table.

The documents delivered to Tinasha from Farsas contained a schedule of events for the day of the party, and she could tell based on the contents that it was also partially a request that she greet and entertain guests as Oscar's companion. Everyone knew that she would marry him upon abdicating the Tuldarr throne, so while she was still queen, she also half belonged to Farsas.

Tinasha felt at her wit's end over the complicated position she'd put herself in. "It's not like I mind talking with guests... It's part of my job, after all. I just can't help but feel like there's a bed of thorns waiting for me."

"That man is certainly very popular with the ladies. You're sure to get your share of dirty looks from jealous girls," Mila pointed out.

Tinasha groaned. "Ugh! No thank you!"

She returned her attention to the papers. At the end, Oscar had scrawled *I'll have a dress ready for you, so come as you are.*

She giggled at his messy handwriting. Without meaning to, she whispered, "I'm so happy..."

Jumping up with the documents in hand, Tinasha skipped over to the open window and hopped up onto the ledge.

Her black locks fluttered in the gentle breeze. She peered outside, her eyes half-lidded in her joy.

It's been more than seven months since I woke up in this era. But it feels like it's gone by so quickly.

Each day was fulfilling; Tinasha felt just as happy as she had the month she spent with Oscar when she was a girl. Perhaps even more so.

Yet from time to time, guilt over her own elation would hit her. So much sacrifice and good faith had brought who she was now into being. That was something she'd never forget.

Still, that was no reason for her to grow pessimistic. If living creatures didn't live freely and proudly, how could the world go on turning? It was the duty of the survivors to keep moving forward—that was what she believed now.

While Tinasha was rereading the papers, she smelled a strange odor and glanced outside.

Mila noticed her frowning and asked, "What is it, Lady Tinasha?"

"Well, it's just... I've caught a whiff of a bit of odd magic."

"Have you? I don't sense anything," Mila replied.

"I suppose it's just my imagination. Maybe someone's practicing their spells."

Tinasha jumped off the windowsill onto the floor. Spirits had been posted in the palace during her three-day absence, but they had reported nothing out of the ordinary. The castle was teeming with mages who often used magic in their research and training. Tinasha decided it was nothing to worry about.

She pulled out her chair and sat back down at her desk, pasted her queen's smile on her face, and reached for the stack of pending documents.

※

"You are not to cause any trouble. Got it?" the young girl warned.

"I know," the man replied as they departed a mansion together. In the face of her stubbornness, he flashed her a smile that masked his true motives. The brilliant grin only appeared to make her more unsure, however.

"Can I trust that you do?" she questioned skeptically.

"You have no faith in me."

"Of course I don't. Look at how you've acted," she spat, but he had nothing to say for himself.

He pushed her forward. "Come on, let's go."

"All right, all right," accepted the girl dressed in her finest, turning her back on the man and marching off.

As he watched her go, a dangerous glint suddenly came into the man's eyes. His good looks took on an openly sinister tinge, and his smile vanished. There was bloodlust sufficient to rip the world to shreds coming from him.

No one was around to see it, though. For now, it remained an unknown element.

"What's taking you? Hurry up, Travis," urged the girl.

"I'm coming. You know, the bow at your back is crooked."

"It is?!" she yelped, reaching around to try to fix it on her own.

Travis grinned and took it upon himself to retie the oversized bow more neatly than she could have. "There, it's fixed now. You'll be the most beautiful one there, Aurelia."

"I don't need your flattery, and I don't want you doing anything stupid," she retorted. Left speechless, the king of the demons snorted and set off.

Indelible traces of bloodlust still lurked beneath the surface of his smile.

※

On the day of the king's birthday celebration, the sky was clear and gorgeous. It was warm, but not hot. Tinasha arrived in Farsas while those inside the castle were still running around to get everything ready. She was directed to a room where she found an eager Sylvia and some ladies-in-waiting. Tinasha's friend and fellow mage seemed to take a particular interest in dressing her, so she put in more effort than was necessary at every opportunity to do so.

"We've been expecting you, Queen Tinasha!" Sylvia trilled. "How I've waited for this day since we very first met!"

"Oof, that's a long time," muttered Tinasha, already exhausted by Sylvia's intense enthusiasm. But she couldn't run away, and she didn't have time to put up a fight. As instructed by Sylvia, Tinasha let herself be bathed by the ladies-in-waiting. She was still a little sleepy, so she didn't mind letting them take care of her. As she breathed in the perfumed oils in the bathwater, she stretched out her limbs.

"Sylvia, are your injuries all healed?" Tinasha asked.

"Yes, completely! Thank you for worrying about me." Sylvia grinned as she ran a comb through Tinasha's long black hair. She was so excited for Tinasha's debut that she could hardly stand it. Her fervor was exemplified by the diverse array of cosmetic bottles all lined up. There were far more than usual.

"The king told me to tell you that the dress you'll be wearing today is his present for your birthday," Sylvia explained.

"It is?!" Tinasha cried; she hadn't expected that at all. Her legs slid from the edges of the tub back into the bath, splashing water onto her face.

She recalled that Oscar had asked when her birthday was around a month ago, when they'd been discussing the annual Farsas party. For

whatever reason, he had pinched her cheek when she'd told him the date had passed already.

Her fiancé's sneak attack made Tinasha flush with joy. "I'm no longer at an age where I celebrate my birthday, so it had totally slipped my mind."

"How old are you now?"

"Umm... four hundred and thirty-two? Or maybe four hundred and thirty-three...?"

Sylvia gave a confused look. "That's... quite unbelievable."

While Tinasha's physical body put her at twenty, she had actually been alive for centuries. In fact, her total number of years was easily twenty times Oscar's. However, since she had spent most of that time asleep, she possessed less life experience than he did.

"Despite all those years, I'm still inexperienced. I have much more to learn," Tinasha said with a slight grimace as she rested her legs on the tub's edge again, crossing them.

The warmth of the water filled her, making her feel entirely protected and safe.

It took another two and a half hours after the bath before Tinasha was completely ready. In that time, she endured a long procession of hairstyle and makeup tests. At first, Sylvia and the ladies-in-waiting asked Tinasha her opinion on each one, but she only gave halfhearted, reluctant answers. So they eventually took it upon themselves to decide everything on their own.

The king's gift was an extravagant gown constructed of unbleached, handwoven lace. Bright-green climbing roses were embroidered along the edges of the short puffed sleeves. The neckline was open, with a row of buttons running down the bodice. The skirts were made of layer upon layer of lace. In the front, the dress flared out in a gentle arc; while in the back, it cascaded into a train.

Sylvia smiled after tying the waist sash into a large bow at the back. "His Majesty understands very well how to best set off your charms."

"Mmm. I have no idea what you're saying," Tinasha responded dully. Sylvia looked rather defeated at that.

Tinasha's hair was half swept back, with an abundance of fresh flowers arranged in the hair at the back of her head. Together with her neat, trim gown, she made for the very picture of loveliness. Nearly gone was the intimidating, daunting aura she normally gave off at formal events. Her soft, charming appearance would fit in perfectly at Oscar's side as his fiancée.

Sylvia took a step back and looked Tinasha over from head to toe, then she made a minute adjustment to the flowers in her hair. "There, it's perfect!"

"Thank you so much," said Tinasha with a smile and a curtsy, then inspected herself in the full-length mirror. In it, she saw a blushing young bride about to head out for her wedding. It was a side of herself she was so unaccustomed to seeing that embarrassment rolled over her.

When she glanced at the clock, she saw it was only a half hour until the event began. Sylvia had begun to tidy everything up to pack it away, and Tinasha asked her, "Can I step out for a bit?"

"Of course you can. Just tell me if anything gets messed up, and I'll fix it," Sylvia answered readily. With that, Tinasha left the room. Picking up her skirts, she made her way down the hallway.

With the party commencing soon, magistrates and ladies-in-waiting were flying back and forth frantically. One by one, they noticed Tinasha and turned their heads to watch her go. Feeling guilty about distracting them, Tinasha headed for a slightly less populated route. She was meandering through the halls when she glanced outside and stopped. In the courtyard below was a girl. Based on her formal garb, she must have been a guest. Her silver hair glittering in the sunlight set off her sky-blue gown. Because Tinasha was up so high, she couldn't see her face clearly, but the girl was looking all around her as if searching for something.

Puzzled, Tinasha lay a hand on the window. She cast a short-range teleportation spell.

The girl was naturally surprised that Tinasha appeared before her so suddenly, but she quickly recognized what the woman had done. Realizing that they were both dressed formally, the girl bowed her head. "Ah, I'm sorry..."

"Is there something you're looking for? Can I help you?" asked Tinasha. If this girl needed help, then two heads were better than one. That seemed to be in the spirit of the festivities.

Seeming frightened, the girl glanced all around her nervously. "Oh, um, I thought I heard a baby crying..."

"A baby?" Tinasha repeated with uncertainty.

Farsas Castle was not home to any infants, unless a guest had traveled with theirs. It was difficult to imagine a guest bringing their newborn to a foreign country, though.

Tinasha listened, but she couldn't hear any crying. The girl must not have been able to hear anything, either, because she blushed and bowed her head. "I'm very sorry for troubling you."

"It's all right. I'll keep an eye out myself," replied Tinasha, and the girl flashed her a charming smile. Her grayish-blue eyes sparkled with a pure glow that drew Tinasha in.

She's very pretty, but that's not all. There's something mysterious about her.

The girl was a mage, or she had the makings of one. Tinasha detected strong magic within her and was impressed.

As the girl glanced shyly over at Tinasha, her eyes momentarily darkened, like someone in pain. Tinasha wanted to ask what was wrong, but the girl bowed her head again before she could. When she lifted her head back up, there were no longer any traces of shadow in her eyes.

She broke into a shy smile. "My companion is waiting for me, so I must take my leave now. Thank you very much for taking the time to help."

"Oh, then I suppose I'll see you around," the queen responded.

The girl gave an eager nod, curtsied, and left. It wasn't until she was out of sight that Tinasha realized she and the girl hadn't introduced themselves. "I should have asked her name."

She was a strangely entrancing person, and it was likely that they'd meet again soon. With that thought in mind, Tinasha returned to the castle.

Once the courtyard was deserted, there came the faint sound of a crying baby.

There was no longer anyone to hear it, however.

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After changing into formalwear of his own while completing the final checks for the event, Oscar appraised Tinasha with narrowed eyes as she entered the ballroom antechamber. Waving her closer, he picked her up and settled her on his knees. "You look stunning in that."

"Thank you for the dress," she replied.

"Mm-hmm. I'm very satisfied with it," he replied quietly, giving a gentle tug to one lock of her hair, careful not to ruin her updo in the back. "Tonight's going to be a pain, but power through it."

"I came here prepared to do so," she assured him with a mischievous grin, holding out her right hand to him, palm up. A silver ring appeared in it. A small obsidian stone reminiscent of her eyes was set into the thin band, and magical sigils were delicately engraved on its surface.

"Give me your hand," she ordered.

"Which one?"

"Either. Oh, but your left one would be best, as it won't get in the way."

Oscar offered his left hand to Tinasha, as she had requested. She picked up the ring and held it against his large, masculine fingers. "Maybe I should make it a little bigger?"

After she gave a short incantation that made the ring grow one size larger, she slipped it onto Oscar's middle finger. With another spell, the ring shrank a little to fit perfectly. Its elastic nature made it seem like it wasn't made of metal at all, and Oscar watched in rapt fascination.

"What's this made of?" he asked.

"Silver. It simply had magic applied to it when it was cast," Tinasha explained, checking the ring's fit. Then she murmured another incantation, but there were no visible changes when this one was done.

Catching Oscar frowning at it in confusion, she smiled. "That made the ring invisible to everyone except you."

"I see. So it's mine now?"

"Of course it is. This is a magic implement with a spell inside. Slide the stone, and it will activate. It will only work once, but it will disable any

teleportation magic within a fixed radius with you at the center. Going out, coming in, and moving objects around will be impossible.”

Oscar’s eyes grew wide as he listened to his fiancée’s explanation. He stared down at the ring. “That’s amazing. Is this because of the battle we had earlier?”

“More or less. I’m sure fighting a mage who can teleport and fly around must be inconvenient for you. You can fly with Nark’s help, of course, but it’ll be easier if no one can teleport around. The effect lasts for about ten minutes. After it’s used, I’ll need to enchant it again.”

“This should really help me out a lot. Thank you,” Oscar said, and Tinasha gave a shy smile. But soon enough, her face took on a serious cast as she emphasized one point. “Once this seals off teleportation, it will prevent both enemies *and* allies from coming in or out, so be very careful about when you choose to use it.”

“So you won’t be able to teleport, either?”

“No, I won’t,” Tinasha confirmed. “If I’d crafted it so that I alone wouldn’t be affected, it would weaken the effect, defeating the purpose. I wanted it powerful enough to trap a witch.”

Oscar nodded. “Got it. I’ll be careful.” Then he checked the ring’s fit.

Lavinia’s attacks with summoned swords were difficult to parry. Should he face another enemy just as formidable again, he would now have a way to tip things back in his favor. Oscar was very grateful that Tinasha observed and learned from his past battles.

She glanced up at him and gave him an utterly enchanting smile. “Happy birthday.”

The words felt a little childish. Evidently, this ring was her present to him. Oscar burst out laughing when he realized that her gift was entirely practical and his wasn’t.

Tinasha’s eyes went as wide as a cat’s as she stared at him. “What? What’s wrong? Did I do something weird?”

“No, not at all. You’re just really fascinating. Thank you,” Oscar said, cupping her cheek and drawing close to press a kiss onto her scarlet-painted lips.

When he pulled away, Tinasha was red to the tips of her ears. She left the room still feeling confused over why he had told her she was fascinating.

The event began on time.

Tinasha stood at Oscar’s side as his fiancée and as the queen of Tuldarr. She offered pleasant smiles to the guests from a litany of countries who kept coming up to greet them. As she did so, she also asked probing questions about several things she needed to research further.

Tuldarr was in the midst of upheaval, and it had recently provided forbidden curse counterattack forces to Farsas during Cezar’s attack. She needed to determine how people from each nation regarded Tuldarr.

Nearly everyone offered excessive praise for the celebration or congratulations on her engagement to Oscar. Only the prince of Tayiri greeted them formally and stiffly.

Once the wave of people subsided, Tinasha leaned over and whispered to Oscar. "No one had any criticism. I was sure there would be."

"See? Aren't you glad we got engaged?"

"I don't think that's it... but yes, sure," she answered. Tinasha was entirely unaware that her appearance was playing a large role. Had she been dressed more like a queen, it might have put the visiting dignitaries on guard. Today, however, she looked like any other beautiful young woman.

The people who came to judge how Tinasha would present herself at her first public appearance as Oscar's fiancée were taken aback upon catching their first glimpse of her smiling so gracefully next to him. In all likelihood, some of them had to be wondering if this was the same queen they'd seen inherit the mystical spirits.

Oscar was deeply amused because he'd anticipated as much when he'd designed Tinasha's dress, though the responses exceeded even his expectations. He smirked as he basked in a faint sense of superiority.

Tinasha didn't seem to enjoy women casting her dirty, jealous looks, but Oscar thought he got his share of those, too. Many people envied him for managing to lay claim to a queen who united incomparable power *and* beauty.

"Although you're quite the wild child on the inside," he muttered.

"Hey! Where's that coming from? I haven't broken any windows today," Tinasha protested.

"Today? Don't break any at *all*. I was just wondering if I'm the only one who can manage you."

Tinasha narrowed her eyes, peering up at Oscar with a puzzled expression. "What are you getting at?"

Before he could answer, a young lady approached the two. Once Tinasha caught sight of her face, she let out a little cry. It was the girl she had met in the courtyard.

With a smile, the silver-haired girl curtsied before them. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Majesties. My name is Aurelia Canao Naysha Faurecia. I have come on behalf of the king of Gandona, and I offer you my most sincere congratulations."

"Thank you for that very courteous greeting. Please give the king my best regards," Oscar replied.

"Of course," Aurelia replied with another curtsy.

Tinasha gave her a dazzling smile. "My name is Tinasha As Meyer Ur Aeterna Tuldarr. I'm sorry for startling you earlier."

"I apologize as well, and I should have introduced myself to you then."

Oscar looked confused, so Tinasha explained that she and Aurelia had met earlier in the courtyard. As she recounted the story, she remembered something. "Oh, didn't you say you were here with someone?"

"Yes, I'm here with my guardian... Travis?" Aurelia called, turning around to summon him over.

Tinasha's jaw dropped. Had she been drinking something, she would have spit it out. Next to her, Oscar was just as stupefied.

A silver-haired man sauntered over to the stunned pair and swept into an elegant bow.

When he rose, he had a teasing smirk on his face. Oscar recovered faster than Tinasha did, placing a hand on Akashia's hilt. He glared at Travis, prepared to draw the weapon at any time.

"You've got some nerve showing yourself before me again," said Oscar in a low, threatening voice.

"Come now, don't you realize where we are? There's a time and a place, Your Majesty," Travis chided.

Things had gotten very tense very quickly, and Tinasha hurried to step between her fiancé and the demon. She held up her hands between them. "L-let's just calm down. Okay, Oscar?"

"Get out of the way, Tinasha," Oscar growled.

"No. You need to stop," she said. A few nearby guests had noticed something was off and glanced in their direction with curiosity.

Tinasha glanced at Travis, still smirking, and Aurelia, whose eyes had gone very wide. Aurelia must have understood Tinasha's distress and tugged on Travis's arm. "Travis! Didn't I tell you not to cause any trouble?!"

"And so I haven't today."

"Then what do you call this?!" she cried, grabbing hold of his ear and tugging on it so hard he bowed his head.

Aurelia lowered her head, too. "I don't know what he's done, but I feel equally responsible. I'm really very sorry."

The king of all demons was being forced to bow by a girl of only fifteen or sixteen. Oscar and Tinasha exchanged a look at the unexpected scene.

Travis was grumbling, "Ow, let me go," but it only made Aurelia pinch him harder.

At a loss for how to reply to that, the king of Farsas let his fiancée pull him back a step. Pressing both hands together in supplication before him, Tinasha pleaded, "I understand how you feel, but calm down. Please."

Upon seeing how truly distressed she looked, Oscar finally regained his composure. Once he'd reined in and concealed his emotions, he turned to Aurelia and said, "I apologize as well. There is no issue, so please lift your head."

"Thank you so much for your forgiveness," she answered, rising. Her silvery-blue eyes darted from the king to Tinasha, but both of their expressions betrayed no trouble.

The king gave Travis a regal look, then bowed formally and took his leave. For a moment, Tinasha seemed like she wanted to say something to Aurelia, but in the end, she merely flashed her a strained smile and followed after Oscar.

As she watched the king and his bride-to-be depart, Aurelia covertly elbowed Travis in the side. "What do you think you were doing?!"

"She's an old acquaintance of mine. I have a history of riling her up a little."

"You are the *worst*," Aurelia said with a sigh. This guardian of hers was constantly getting himself into trouble with ladies because of his good looks and bad personality. It wasn't impossible to think he might have a history with the beautiful queen of Tuldarr.

Aurelia threw him a look full of worry, anger, and a tiny bit of jealousy. "An old flame?"

"Of course not. I don't go for that independent type at all," Travis replied flippantly, though he raised one eyebrow like he'd realized something. He stared at Aurelia.

She fidgeted, uncomfortable under Travis's gaze. "What?" she asked.

"Hmm... actually, I suppose there are a few self-sufficient girls that are all right," he said.

"Is that so?" Aurelia said in a chilly, unamused tone.

It wasn't too strange. Of course he would be fond of someone beautiful. Aurelia recalled when she and the queen first met in the courtyard. Tinasha had come down because she saw that a stranger was searching for something.

She was warm, kind, and beautiful in a mature way. Anyone would adore her.

Aurelia closed her eyes. Those silly thoughts were making her heart hurt. It didn't matter, because the queen was already engaged. Before she could hang her head too low, Travis stroked her hair. "Be a good girl."

"Don't treat me like a child."

"But you *are* a child. Behave, and I'll protect you. I promise," he reminded her. Aurelia couldn't bring herself to glance up and see what kind of expression Travis was making.

She nodded anyway, though, choosing to believe him.

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By the time the event was winding down and guests were starting to leave, a man and a woman were floating high in the skies above Farsas Castle. The woman's manicured brows were gathered in a scowl as she spat, "That was a horrible trick you pulled back there..."

"What an accusation. I simply attended as the guardian of the heir to a throne," he replied innocently.

"Wow. Nice excuse... exactly what I'd expect from someone who isn't human." The woman sighed, massaging her aching temples. "I got chewed out for *your* antics. Please don't do that to me again."

"How wonderful for you that you're marrying such a narrow-minded man. Anyway, I have something to discuss with you."

"What is it?" she asked carelessly.

An evil smile materialized on Travis's face. He pointed straight at her. "I want to collect on the debt you owe me for saving your life."

Before her mind even had time to comprehend the meaning of his words, a chill ran up Tinasha's spine. Twice now, Travis had let her go free when she was on the verge of death. Now he wanted to cash in that favor. Tinasha quickly summoned a spell.

However, Travis waved a hand to stop her. "Don't be so hasty. I'm not here to kill you. I have a request to make."

Tinasha frowned. Dismissing her half-formed magic, she tilted her head to one side. "What is it?"

"I want you to stand in for my girl," Travis stated.

"Excuse me?!" Tinasha exclaimed. She didn't immediately understand, but assumed that his "girl" was Aurelia, the pretty young thing Tinasha had met earlier. While she was still very young, she did possess a mysterious charm. Her will was strong, and she was clearly intelligent.

But why did Travis want Tinasha to act as a proxy for her? The insane request was difficult to make sense of.

"What do you mean, 'stand in'?"

"Apparently, a pest of a woman has just woken up, and I think she's going to try killing Aurelia. I'm planning to go end the threat myself before that can happen, but I don't want one of her underlings sneaking in while I'm away. I'll post guards, but that's not enough to reassure me. So I want you to take Aurelia's place."

"Seriously?"

What an exceedingly inconvenient, selfish request. Tinasha felt sorry for Aurelia, who had gotten dragged into this. Feeling a headache coming on, Tinasha pressed her fingers against her temples again. "When you say 'a pest of a woman,' what do you mean?"

"Someone just like me."

"So she has a twisted personality?"

"No," Travis snapped. "I mean she has the same rank as me."

"Which means... she's a demon queen?!"

"More or less. She's pretty clingy. It's been a real pain."

"What kind of love life do you have?" Tinasha muttered. The witch Tinasha killed had also been one of Travis's old paramours. He must have dumped her in the most despicable way because she'd positively loathed him. Supposedly, he couldn't kill the witch because of a contract he'd signed with her when she'd first summoned him. It was quite fortunate for him that Tinasha ended up killing her.

While Tinasha struggled to accept the situation, Travis continued matter-of-factly. "Given what you owe me, you have no right to refuse."

"Hold on, just a minute here," Tinasha insisted, holding up both hands in the air. Travis was instructing her to become a target for another supremely

powerful demon. There was no world in which she would instantly agree to that.

Travis wasn't about to let Tinasha refuse, however. Glaring at her in disgust, he said, "Are you stupid? This will make us even. I'd call this a good deal for you."

"Yes, but..."

"You know, your marrying into Farsas certainly makes things interesting. Tuldarr or Farsas, which is your country, I wonder?" he taunted. Tinasha paled as she realized what he was referring to. A long time ago, as thanks for killing the witch, Travis had promised not to do anything to *her country*. The implication was that after she wed Oscar, she would have to choose one over the other. Travis was threatening harm against the one she didn't pick.

Gandona and Farsas shared a border. Tinasha certainly wanted to keep Travis from hurting Farsas, but she didn't want him damaging Tuldarr, either.

"Accept, and I'll steer clear of both nations, so long as your bloodline continues. One or two doesn't make much difference to me."

"Urgh..."

Travis was offering a lot, which meant that his request had to be incredibly dangerous.

Tinasha crossed her arms. When she shot a glance at Travis, he flashed her one of his usual easy, indolent grins. She could tell it was a facade, however.

"What is Aurelia to you?" Tinasha questioned.

"Where'd that come from?" he countered.

"I'd just like to know."

Travis's face screwed up in annoyance at the inquiry. He looked like he wanted to brush it off but gave up on that once he caught sight of the serious look in Tinasha's eyes. He tutted in irritation. "She's just some girl. I like her, so I stick around. That's all it is. I don't want her to die when she's still so young."

"Hmmm."

"Are you going to do it or aren't you?" Travis demanded.

"I'll do it," Tinasha agreed with a shrug. While it was going to be a bother, the terms were the most favorable Travis would ever give. Travis would handle the demon queen herself, and Tinasha had her spirits if she ran into trouble. It wasn't a bad deal.

Besides, it would certainly be a shame for Aurelia to die. Tinasha had been rescued when she was close to Aurelia's age, and she wanted to protect someone in return. Plus, Travis's attachment to the heir to Gandona was intriguing. Maybe his time with Aurelia was changing him.

Once Tinasha agreed, the briefest glint of relief crossed Travis's black eyes. It quickly vanished, though, replaced by his typical cockiness. "All right. Unbutton your bodice a little."

Tinasha looked offended. "Why should I?"

"I have to put it somewhere that your clothing will conceal it. Keep blathering, and I'm just going to tear your dress open."

"N-no thank you," Tinasha said. Oscar had given her this gown. Despite some reluctance, she undid three buttons in the front to expose more of her chest. Travis pointed to the patch of creamy white skin.

"Blossom."

With just one word, a crest the size of a child's palm appeared on Tinasha's skin. The vermilion mark in the shape of a rose stood out against her porcelain flesh. The bright red hue made it look almost poisonous.

"That should do it. That mark says that you're mine. Any demon will recognize it right away."

"Whoa. You're going to erase this later, right?" Tinasha asked.

Travis nodded. "Once everything is over, I will. Try not to get yourself killed."

"I know, I know. Does Aurelia have one of these, too?"

"Of course not," Travis replied curtly, then he vanished.

Tinasha stared at the spot where he'd been floating, her eyes wide. "Well, that was... unexpected."

This was a demon who, up until now, had cast people aside like disposable playthings. Yet now he was treating a girl like his most precious treasure. Twice now, Tinasha had escaped death only on Travis's whim. She gazed up at the sky and burst out laughing, unsure whether she should feel more amused or terrified.

The party had concluded twenty minutes before, and all the guests who were not staying at the castle had gone home. Lazar finished clearing things away in the ballroom and was about to leave when Oscar called out, "Have you seen Tinasha?"

"No, I haven't," Lazar replied, suddenly realizing she'd been absent for a while. "Shall I go search for her?"

"Please. Try her dressing room and my rooms."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Lazar replied, aware that Oscar's stormy countenance stemmed from the tiff he had gotten into with the guests from Gandona. Lazar had already verified that Aurelia and her companion were back in Gandona, but the king still appeared troubled.

As ordered, Lazar checked the room assigned to Tinasha for use as her dressing room, but no one was there. He then headed for the king's rooms.

"Surely she didn't return to Tuldarr without saying anything," Lazar muttered.

He made his way down the corridor until he heard a strange noise and stopped. It sounded like a cat meowing. Lazar followed the sound around a corner and arrived at a pillar just past where a guard was posted. A large basket was set behind the column.

Did someone abandon a cat?

Lazar inspected the basket. A white cloth covered the top, but the noises were undoubtedly coming from underneath. Lazar lifted the fabric and then had to stifle a cry of surprise.

A human baby of no more than four months was lying in the basket. The infant had stopped crying, likely from the surprise of being met by another person. Blue eyes flew open and scanned the surroundings.

Lazar met the child's gaze, and he gasped. "Did... someone lose a baby? That can't be..."

Flustered, Lazar looked all around the hallway. No one was there. Deciding he should take the baby somewhere safe, he picked up the basket, only to notice a letter tucked inside. Upon close inspection, it was only a folded note and not even formally sealed.

The message was addressed to the king of Farsas. Lazar quickly scanned the few written lines.

Lazar nearly shrieked again at how unbelievable the letter was. The baby started crying once more before he could, however. He tried to pick up the infant, but the note was in the way.

"I'll take that," said someone from behind, plucking the letter from Lazar's hands.

"Oh, thank you," Lazar replied as he bent to grab the child. But just as he was breathing a sigh of relief, he froze. Who was behind him?

Fearfully, Lazar turned around—and this time he really did scream. The king's fiancée was standing only a few paces away. "AAAAHHHH!"

"Whoa!" Tinasha cried, putting her hands over her head. When she dropped them, she scowled at Lazar. "You're going to startle the baby. What do you think you're doing?"

"Th-the letter... the letter..."

"What about it? Should I read it?"

"N-no..."

Lazar blubbered, incapable of thinking up a way to cleverly stop her.

Tinasha opened up the note, and her dark eyes scanned the contents. "What in the world...?"

"W-wait, Queen Tinasha—"

"What's all this fuss about? Oh, there you are, Tinasha." Oscar strolled up from the opposite end of the hallway. He must have heard Lazar's shriek.

Lazar didn't know if Oscar's arrival meant salvation or damnation.

The king glanced from his grimacing fiancée to his attendant, who looked about to burst into tears. Then his gaze landed on the baby Lazar was holding, and his expression turned to one of shock. "Whose child is that? Where did it come from?"

Instead of answering, Tinasha held out the piece of paper to him. Oscar received it and read it quickly. In a lady's handwriting, the letter claimed that the infant was the king's, and requested that he raise it.

"What is *this*?" Oscar asked.

The woman who'd penned the note did not name herself. Oscar was so stunned he almost let the piece of paper fall to the floor. To Tinasha, who looked extremely unamused, he managed, "It's not mine."

"Y-yes, that must be true! His Majesty wouldn't make such a foolish mistake!" Lazar frantically added, his support only digging a deeper hole for his king. Oscar gave him a light slap upside the head.

Tinasha coldly eyed the two men who were losing their heads over this unanticipated turn of events. "Do both of you think I'm stupid? The math doesn't add up here any way you look at it."

Oscar and Lazar looked at each other. When they thought about it, they realized Tinasha was right. The king's curse had only been broken two months ago. No child of his would've been born yet. What's more, Oscar got engaged to Tinasha shortly after the curse was lifted.

Despite this, Lazar didn't appear relieved in the slightest. "Then that can only mean..." he muttered, trailing off.

"Someone abandoned this baby?" Oscar finished.

All three fell silent. The baby in Lazar's arms stared up at them curiously.

For the time being, Oscar had Lazar drop off the infant with some ladies-in-waiting while he and Tinasha returned to his chambers.

Glaring at the letter, Oscar let out an annoyed sigh. "Who the hell did this?"

"You don't have any idea?" she asked.

"None. I don't recognize the handwriting, and there's no name."

Ordinarily, someone in the castle would notice a stranger hanging around, but because of the party, there'd been tons of international visitors coming and going all night. Oscar issued an inquiry, but it turned up no useful information.

Floating up into the air, Tinasha gave a thoughtful hum. "Nowadays, both parties have to give consent before having a baby, right?"

"Essentially, yeah. Men and women can drink a potion that prevents pregnancies. Were things not like that four hundred years ago?" Oscar asked.

"No, we didn't have any concoctions like that. I read that it was invented three centuries back."

According to records from the era in which it was invented, the contraceptive potion came about as an accidental by-product during research into a cure for infertility in the eastern country of Mensanne. In modern times, it was inexpensive and readily available, meaning that far fewer unwanted children were born now than in the Dark Age.

So then, how had this baby come to be abandoned?

"Oh... actually, Aurelia heard crying and was searching for the source in the courtyard," Tinasha recalled.

"She heard it? When was this?"

"Just before the party started. But there's no record of anyone bringing an infant to the castle, is there?"

"No... I guess someone hid in the crowd and snuck it in," Oscar replied.

Who would abandon a baby, and why?

Tinasha slowly revolved once in midair, pondering over that. Then she landed in front of Oscar, sweeping the long train of her dress back. "Should I hold on to the child?"

"Why you? We have caretakers in the castle."

"It could be part of some scheme. The sudden appearance and the letter seem odd," she pointed out.

"Did you sense anything suspicious?"

"Not particularly, but we should still be cautious," Tinasha admitted with a shrug. Perhaps she was being overly wary, but Oscar understood there was no reason to accept this at face value and suspect nothing.

"In that case, that Valt guy's probably not the one behind this," he suggested with a tight grimace.

"Why would you say that?"

"Because he knows about my curse, doesn't he?"

"Oh! That's right..."

For whatever bizarre reason, Valt knew all sorts of secret information. He'd sent Delilah into the castle with full awareness of Oscar's curse. If Valt was the mastermind behind the abandoned child, too, it didn't make sense that he'd attach a letter so quickly exposed as a fake.

"So that means it's someone else," Tinasha mused with a frown, floating up into the air again. However, Oscar grabbed hold of the train of her gown and pulled her down. Careful of the delicate fabric, she landed in his arms. Perhaps it was time to change clothes.

Hoisting her up in his arms, Oscar lay a hand along her cheek. "Well, let's see how things play out in Farsas for a bit. The mother may have a change of heart and come to get the baby."

"Yes... she may," Tinasha replied, thinking to herself that Oscar was so sweet. He wasn't just soft on others; he was kind and strong in equal measure. That was a quality she lacked.

Tinasha gazed into his dark blue eyes, the color of twilight after the sun had just set. His strength, his force of will, and his straightforward attitude all held her fast. While he could be sarcastic and mean, and he occasionally treated her like a child, that only made him all the more irresistible, much to her dismay.

He gave her the power to fight and the serenity to relax. So long as he was there, she could be strong—even if she ended up all alone. Love was the only word appropriate for such a fuzzy and indefinable feeling.

Sensing herself passing into a daze while staring at Oscar, Tinasha closed her eyes, placing a soft kiss on his lips instead. Her face felt hot with the urge to cry.

When she pulled back, Oscar regarded her with a wry look. "What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You look like you're about to burst into tears, crybaby."

Oscar was right, and Tinasha made an upset face. But with a little tilt of her head, a smile returned to her lips—one as cool and clear as the moon. Many long years had informed that quiet expression of hers, which soon morphed into a timid blush.

"I'm just happy," she whispered into his ear.

Red was starting to streak the sky. Tinasha slid to the floor and checked the time. As Oscar headed to change, he asked, "What, do you have somewhere to be?"

"No, not particularly."

"Then you should stay with me tonight."

"I suppose I should," Tinasha replied, heading for the door to go back to her rooms and change out of her dress first.

But he caught her hand. "Where are you going?"

"To change. I'd hate to get your gift dirty."

"I'll have it brought away later. Just stay here," Oscar said, hugging Tinasha from behind and pressing a kiss to her exposed nape.

The sensation and the dizziness it brought with it left Tinasha weak in the knees, but she snapped back to her senses when she felt Oscar's hand brush along her neck. She remembered the thing she needed to keep in mind.

Flustered, Tinasha twisted to escape Oscar's arms. Then she backed away from her confused fiancé. "Sorry, I remembered something I need to do. I'll be heading back now."

"What could be that urgent?" Oscar pressed.

"Well, just... an old illness flaring up..."

"Wow. I would've thought a queen could come up with a better excuse."

Her face frozen stiff, Tinasha had one arm pressed across her breast. She was currently sporting a very indelible mark there, one burned on so strongly that no camouflage magic would work on it. It signified that she belonged to another man. There was no telling how furious Oscar would be if he saw it.

He seemed to be interpreting Tinasha's evasive behavior differently. With a frown, he let out a sigh. "What? Are you mad about earlier?"

"Huh? About what?"

"That nonsense Lazar was spouting."

"Oh, that..."

The two men really had dug a spectacular hole for themselves. Because it had no bearing on the issue at hand, Tinasha had let it slide at the time. Upon further rumination, it was not exactly a pleasant thought, but it was also not something worth getting upset over. It wouldn't be surprising to

learn that Oscar had slept with other women. In fact, Tinasha assumed as much.

Yet she gave a little clap of her hands and nodded, pasting a bright smile on her face. "Yes, exactly. I'm very mad about that, so I will be leaving now!"

"Hey, listen... Wait just a minute," Oscar protested.

"No, thank you. I'll see you later," she stated briskly, then escaped while she had the chance.

Her sudden departure left Oscar stunned. Unaware that his fiancée had just pulled one over on him, he decided to go to bed with the issue unresolved.

※

When Tinasha teleported back into her chambers in Tuldarr, she found Mila, Karr, and Lilia having tea there. While the spirits did not usually appear unless summoned, she always posted a few to remain on standby to handle any emergencies while she was out of the country.

"Oh? You're back, Lady Tinasha? I thought you'd be spending the night," said Mila, turning around in her chair.

Once all three spirits got a good look at their master, a chill of fright ran through them. Lilia's teacup fell from her hands and shattered into two on the floor. "L-Lady Tinasha! What is *that*?! What happened?! Oh, you're still chaste? That's some relief!"

"Ah, I suppose there's no hiding this from any of you," Tinasha remarked with a sigh, smiling bitterly at the spirits' reaction. Evidently, the mark was visible to them even over clothing, and they recognized who had made it.

With great concern, Karr asked, "You okay? Did something happen?"

"A lot has happened," replied Tinasha, going over to her bed and sinking down on the edge of it. She gave the three spirits a summary of events.

Once they heard about the demon king's offer, they all made faces of disgust.

"*She's* awake? Eugh," Lilia spat as she magically repaired the broken teacup.

Tinasha gave a long exhale. "Do you know the spirit Travis was talking about? What's she like?"

"Mmm, if I had to describe her in one word..."

The spirits exchanged a glance, and then all spoke at once.

"Spiteful."

"Arrogant."

"Sadistic."

"Yeesh," Tinasha responded. What an assortment of characteristics. Perhaps such qualities were just part of being one of the highest-ranking demons, for many of those same words applied to Travis.

Karr rested his chin in one hand, looking utterly fatigued. "Since you have wards up here, it should be all right to say her name. We call her... Lady Phaedra. She's always stuck to Travis like glue. She's popped up in the human realm multiple times and killed everyone close to him."

"A-ha-ha, she's just like Lady Tinasha then. Super clingy!" teased Mila.

"I have never killed any of my love rivals!" Tinasha snapped, offended by the mere comparison.

But Mila just smiled at her master's outburst. "Oh, no, humans are no contest for Lady Phaedra. Think about it this way: You'd be upset if you had to watch the one you loved gazing at an ants' nest and toying with it all day, right?"

"That *would* drive me crazy," Tinasha admitted.

She felt a headache coming on.

So to demons, humans really were no better than insects, which was why they had no interest in them and didn't involve themselves with them. For the king of all demons to be interested in humans and live alongside them was truly out of the ordinary. No wonder a fellow demon of Travis's rank was upset by it.

While Tinasha could sympathize with this unfamiliar demon woman on some level, she still couldn't understand her actions. She shook her head. "No matter how strange I found my partner's interests, I would never try to destroy something he cared for."

"And that's where your personalities differ. If only Lady Phaedra could just leave it alone," Lilia responded, sighing.

"Well, I guess if Lord Travis is going to kill her, then you don't really need to worry. He's stronger than she is and all. You should be able to handle one of her underlings," Karr remarked.

"Absolutely. Call on us anytime you need to," Mila added flippantly.

Watching all of them dismiss the situation, Tinasha let out a heavy sigh. She looked at each of them in turn. After a little hesitation, she managed to blurt out, "So are we humans just insects to all of you?"

The three spirits exchanged glances, and a moment of silence passed. As Tinasha regarded them anxiously, all three burst out laughing.

"Wh-what is it?" she asked.

"Ah, it's just that we've been living over here for so long. I've gotten more and more used to things. Humans are interesting, and I like you," said Karr.

"As demons go, we're a bit unusual for signing a contract in the first place, you know," Lilia pointed out.

"Exactly. If we were unhappy, we would've gone back when the contract with Tuldarr was dissolved," Mila stated.

Each of them felt somewhat differently, but their underlying affection was the same.

Feeling her initial astonishment turn to warm relief, Tinasha closed her eyes. "Thank you..."

Her spirits had been with her four hundred years ago, and they were with her now, too. She reflected with fondness on her cherished friends.

■ 9. The Present According to the Future

The pale azure light of the moon shone down onto the earth. Amid the all-immersive dark of night, a town to the northwest of Tuldarr's capital city slept deeply.

Apart from the occasional distant howling of a dog, all was still. Silence reigned.

However, something crawled very slowly through the grass on the edge of town.

It moved so sluggishly that a casual glance in its direction would reveal nothing at all. The sprouting seed absorbed the moonlight and glowed with magic as it gradually grew ever larger.

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Lying on her back, she gazed up to see an unfamiliar man leaning over her. He was standing right next to her, something warping his considerate smile as he gazed down at her.

Whispering something, he lifted the object in his grip. The sharp edge of a dagger flashed in the argent light streaming from the window. He plunged it down toward her belly without hesitation, and she let out a shriek.

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Aurelia jerked awake with a scream. She was in her room in the estate, alone. There was no one else there, and she was uninjured.

The dream had felt so real. She was shaking all over as she hugged herself. Sweat coated her body

"I am so... glad... I woke up..."

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Aurelia's racing heart practically stopped.

"What's wrong, Aurelia?" Travis asked as he walked in. Once she saw his face, she finally trusted that she was back in reality and felt relief wash over her.

"I had a dream... Someone was trying to stab me... They..."

"You had a vision about her past, huh?" Travis said with an irritated click of his tongue.

Aurelia had an unusual ability to see into the history of others. Normally, Travis kept that power suppressed, but it did slip through the seal when Aurelia encountered someone with a particularly intense past. Powerful mages typically had old traumas, and there was no better example of that than Tinasha. It was truly an unfortunate accident that Aurelia had met her when Travis hadn't been there.

"I'll take that memory out. Her past is wholly unpleasant," the demon stated. He approached the edge of the bed and laid a hand on Aurelia's forehead. After some hesitation, the girl closed her eyes. He gazed down at her.

Her face is so small and pale.

She was so fragile. Should he wish to, he could snap his fingers and make her disappear. Not even dust would remain.

If he killed her now... she would linger in his memories forever, and the loss would torment him. Aurelia had the power to do that to him. Her strong will glowed from within her tender, vulnerable frame.

Why was he so attached to her? Even Travis couldn't say. At some point, he'd found himself fascinated by the way she was intent on standing on her own two feet, even though they were shaky and trembling. She never gave up on herself. Despite being a weak creature, she was stronger than anything.

For that reason, Travis was willing to pay any price to keep her safe. Each time Aurelia spoke his name, he could feel something inside him changing.

He whispered the girl's name, and she looked up at him.

"What?"

"I'm going to have to step out for a bit. I'll post some guards, so behave while I'm away," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"Somewhere good. I'll be back before you know it."

Aurelia cast a suspicious look at Travis. "What does that mean? You're not going off to cause trouble, are you?"

"I'm not. Have a little faith."

"Impossible," she fired back. Travis made an exasperated face.

The expression turned unusually grave after a moment, though. "If someone you don't know comes by asking about me while I'm gone, tell them I'm head over heels for that woman."

"What woman? The queen of Tuldarr?"

"Yep. Also, do not leave this house under any circumstances."

"O-okay," Aurelia replied, feeling compelled to nod.

Noticing the worry in her eyes, Travis gave her a smile and stroked her hair to assuage her doubts. "Now that you understand, go back to sleep. Don't want any dark circles under your eyes tomorrow."

"No, I don't," Aurelia agreed, lying back down. She glanced up at Travis, watching how the moonlight threw his features into dark relief. "So you're coming back?"

"Of course I am. I'll return before you know it," he answered.

He hadn't told a single lie where it counted, so Aurelia felt she could believe him.

She closed her eyes and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

When she woke up the following day, he was gone.

※

In the morning, a half-asleep Tinasha dragged herself into a bath. An hour later, the blood in her body was finally circulating, and she felt more awake. She stood naked before her full-length mirror, examining her pale and slender form. Her lips curled downward as she observed the bright red crest blooming across her chest.

"I suppose I'm glad it's somewhere I can hide, but it's quite the garish symbol," she commented.

"Of course it is. That's the sort of thing that's meant to be shown off. It's like he wrote his name on you," Lilia pointed out from behind her, handing her master a fresh set of clothes. "You shouldn't wear any light fabrics. It'll stand out like a beacon."

"It's too dangerous for me to go to Farsas until it's gone."

"That Akashia swordsman might rip it clean off your skin if he found out," Lilia agreed.

"Stop it, that isn't even funny..."

He wouldn't really, but he might be so angry that he'd want to. Oscar would definitely hate Travis even more than he already did. Keeping it a secret from him was absolutely critical.

Tinasha donned a mage's robe that buttoned up to her neck. "I wonder how long it'll take until the situation is resolved."

Lilia shrugged. "Who knows? That all depends on Travis."

"Meaning it's completely unpredictable," Tinasha concluded, gazing beseechingly up at the ceiling.

It was that very afternoon when the first attack came.

The queen was doing paperwork in her study when she abruptly looked up. Something was approaching from the air, tripping the castle wards. Tinasha looked to Mila, who was sitting in a corner of the room.

"They're here," the spirit said.

"Looks like it," Tinasha concurred, getting to her feet. As she did, a man teleported into the center of the room. The high-handed way of warping in

without even setting any coordinates was something only the highest-ranking demons could do.

The slim man with bright lavender hair gazed right at Tinasha, or rather, at the mark on her chest. He sneered, as if he were looking upon something too trifling to even bother with. "Are you his little doll of the moment?"

"Well... I suppose he does often toy with me. Why are you here?" she replied.

"My master says that mark of yours is hideous. Your life's a short one anyway, so it won't matter much when it ends, will it?"

"I agree with half of what you said. However—"

Tinasha grinned and spread her arms wide. In response, an enormous spell configuration hidden within the room flared to life. A magic circle made of silver threads materialized on the floor, with the man at its center.

It was then that the demon realized he had walked right into a very carefully planned ambush.

With a beatific smile on her lips, Tinasha stretched a hand out toward him. "Today will not be the day I perish."

She snapped her fingers, and power surged forth.

There wasn't even time to scream. With a horror-struck expression, he exploded into pieces. Bits of murky blood and guts and black fog spattered all over the room. The gruesome spray hit a barrier Mila had set up and dripped onto the floor.

"That was over too soon," Mila giggled. With a wave of her hand, the barrier and the man's remains vanished.

The queen resettled back into her chair, a tight smile on her face. "If they're all that weak, I welcome however many more she sends."

"It does feel like a waste of time."

It was Tinasha's belief that the success or failure of magical warfare hinged on strategy, whether the target was a human or a demon. As long as she knew her enemy was coming, it wasn't too difficult to engage them, high-ranking demon or not.

Still, Tinasha felt uneasy as she reset the spell in the room.

There's no way something Travis asked me to do would be this easy...

※

"Danan's been wiped out," a woman muttered dispassionately, her tone belying a lack of any real grief. But to those who knew her well, that was shocking in and of itself. The demons stationed around her all froze.

The woman seated on the throne was as beautiful as a painting—so much so that she didn't seem real. Her long silver hair flowed to the ground in gentle waves. The shimmer of the clearest ocean waters shone in her eyes.

While she appeared to be around twenty years old, her true age far exceeded one thousand. She was one of those at the pinnacle of the demon race.

Resting her chin in one hand, she said to the man kneeling closest to her, "I wonder what his new toy is like."

"It would seem she is a powerful mage, for a mortal. However... she is served by twelve of our own," a man answered timidly.

The woman frowned. Her lips curled in a sneer. "Twelve? They can't be much better than trash to serve such a lowly worm. What a disgrace to our people. I'll put all of them out of their misery while I'm at it."

"Oh, but I think I'll be putting *you* out of your misery first," someone called. All present let out cries of shock as their gazes converged on a silver-haired man with a gorgeous face and a derisive smirk on his lips.

The woman rose, a mixture of surprise and joy in her expression. "Travis! You've come?"

"Only because you've forced me to," he said. The woman stepped forward joyously, but Travis snorted and kept her away. "I want you to stop clinging to me already. This is the last time I'm going to bother with you, Phaedra... You can break into a million pieces for all I care."

It was a brutal statement.

Phaedra's smile froze on her face.

Then a huge wave of power tore the hall apart.

※

Oscar caught a baby's cry, and a strained grin came to his lips.

The abandoned infant was a boy, and for convenience's sake, he had been given the name Ian.

It was two days after the celebration, and there was still no information on the child, and no parent had come forth. The ladies-in-waiting in the castle were still taking care of the child in shifts.

After tidying up some papers, Lazar caught sight of the king's expression and pricked up his ears. "What will we do if we never find the baby's parents?"

"Raise him in town, I guess. We'll find him a foster family," Oscar replied, and Lazar nodded in relief.

Oscar narrowed his eyes at him. "Don't think I've forgotten how *you* screwed things up with Tinasha and got her upset with me. I'm still working out how you're going to pay that one off."

"B-but I was only speaking the truth," Lazar countered.

"Maybe, but you still didn't need to say it. I wonder how long you can stand being hung upside down."

"N-not even an hour!" Lazar squeaked, violently shaking his head back and forth. Oscar eyed his panicked friend, who looked utterly defeated. "Anyway... I never thought she would truly take offense to it."

"You know she's the jealous type. We're just lucky all the windows stayed intact. Although maybe breaking a few would've helped her feel better? I might set aside some panes for her to smash if she needs to."

"She'd be even angrier with you if you did that, Your Majesty. But at the time, she really didn't seem too bothered by what I let slip..."

"So you agree that you let something slip," Oscar said.

Lazar was right, though. Tinasha really hadn't looked that upset. Or maybe she just hadn't let it show.

She'd given her flimsy excuse about a sickness before Oscar had brought that up, however. Something didn't add up. It was nagging at him.

Oscar frowned. "I guess I'll just ask her about it the next time we meet."

He reached for his next set of documents. Privately, Lazar breathed a sigh of relief.

Now the baby's crying sounded much louder than before. A lady-in-waiting had to be walking around with the infant, trying to soothe him.

Oscar found that odd, but he returned to his work instead of checking on it.

※

The day she first met him, Aurelia was covered in mud.

Occasionally, she had dreams about that rainy day.

She'd lost her parents when she was only ten, but she had to go much further back in her memories than that to recall a time when they'd showed her affection.

When Aurelia was around five, she had asked her mother, "Did Grandfather hit you yesterday, Mother?"

She would never forget her mother's reaction. It shifted gradually from astonishment to fear. Young as Aurelia was, she couldn't understand why her mother reacted like that.

After many more conversations like that one, Aurelia finally learned that she should not speak of everything she saw in her mind. But by that time, her parents no longer wished to see her.

They would leave her at home and rarely return. Even when she did see them, they would treat her as if she didn't exist.

But when they passed away, Aurelia cried, nonetheless. Of course she was sad. They had hardly shown any kindness to her, but she still loved them.

It rained during the funeral the following day.

Aurelia was hiding out under a tree in a corner of the expansive gardens, sobbing. She couldn't take the servants' pitying looks.

After she'd cried herself out and her whole body had grown cold, Aurelia got up to go back inside... only to slip in the mud and fall over. With both hands planted in the muck, she felt fresh tears begin to roll down her cheeks.

All of a sudden, a man's voice came from overhead. "Are you crying? Oh, you're all muddy, too. Can't you get up on your own?"

He sounded amused, whoever he was. Aurelia didn't recognize the voice.

Glancing up, she saw a beautiful man she had never seen before. His bright silver hair wasn't wet from the rain at all. He was floating a little above the ground; perhaps he didn't want to get his shoes dirty.

Aurelia slowly climbed to her feet and brushed the mud off her hands. Throwing out her chest, she stared at him head-on. "I was crying, but I can stand on my own. A little grime doesn't bother me."

He was taken aback by the strength of will blazing in her eyes.

That was how the story of Travis and Aurelia began.

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After waking, she walked around the mansion, looking for Travis. That had been her habit for over a week now.

He still hadn't returned. A blond man was standing at attention in the great hall. He was a guard Travis had left behind.

"Hey, do you know where Travis went? He told me he'd be right back, but he's not," Aurelia said.

"There is no need to worry. He will return. I'm sure he's simply taken a detour on his way back," the man answered.

"I hope that's all it is..."

She had known ever since they met that her guardian wasn't human. Travis had never made an attempt to conceal that from her. Just when she'd thought the man she met at her parents' funeral was gone for good, he'd reappeared as a duke claiming to be her legal guardian. Her jaw had dropped.

When she asked him if he was strong for a demon, he made a face and gave her a roundabout answer. "Listen, the higher rank you are as a demon, the more you need to present as a human, or you'll lose yourself."

He consumed food; he bled. That made him a very high-ranking demon.

When she asked him why he consorted with humans, he replied, "Because it's fun."

He had a nasty personality and a bad philandering habit. When they were together, *she* felt like the guardian.

Worst of all, he was utterly incorrigible. Was that just his demon nature?

Yet, all the while, he supported her. That was more evident now that he was gone.

Aurelia was the black sheep of the Gandona royal family, but Travis never abandoned her. His attitude was to never look back and never give up. There were struggles along the way, but he was always by Aurelia's side as she worked to move forward.

Where could he be? Why wasn't he coming back? With so little information, she could only worry.

She bit her lip. "Travis..."

What if he's gone to that beautiful queen?

The queen Aurelia had met in Farsas was unlike the rest of his usual entourage. When she pondered why she felt so uneasy about her, Aurelia realized something. Based on Tinasha's attitude when she saw Travis in the ballroom, she probably knew what Travis was.

Aurelia didn't know if it was because she was such an exceptional mage or because they had some shared history. Regardless, the queen knew Travis was a demon, and she was still close with him.

Perhaps she knows where he is.

Aurelia closed her eyes. She was just too anxious. Little by little, that fretting was turning to a leaden feeling in her gut.

How long would he be with her? Would he leave someday?

Maybe he already had.

Aurelia fought back her hesitation, opened her eyes, and marched out of the great hall. Determination burned deep within her heart.

※

All had been calm in Tuldarr since the attack one week before. Tinasha stopped in the middle of her daily paperwork to stretch her arms overhead. She even let out a silly squeak, which attracted the attention of Karr and Mila, who were playing cards.

"Things sure are peaceful," commented Mila.

"It's not over yet, though," Karr pointed out.

No more assassins had come, but that didn't mean the situation was resolved. The mark on Tinasha's chest hadn't disappeared, and Travis hadn't dropped by.

Tinasha pulled down her shirt a little to check on the brand. "How long is this going to take?"

"Time passes differently over there, so it's likely only been a few hours for them at most," Mila replied.

"What? Really? I had no idea," Tinasha replied.

"Demons in the demon realm only exist as conceptual entities, so they don't pay much attention to how long or slow time is."

"I see..."

High-ranking demons existed on a separate plane of existence. Only a few chose to appear in the human realm.

Unable to fathom such a world, Tinasha sighed. "Travis will definitely win, right?"

"Undoubtedly. There are twelve demons in the uppermost echelons, but he is the strongest of them all. Lady Phaedra is at the top of the midrange," Mila explained.

"Wow. There's a whole other ten of them."

"Personally, I think you're much more impressive. It's hard to believe you have as much magic as a higher-ranking demon in that fragile little body of yours," Karr remarked.

"Hmm. We must seem very strange to one another, demons and humans," Tinasha mused as she gazed out the window. Clouds covered the sky; it was not fair weather that day.

Wondering if it was going to rain, Tinasha got up from her desk and walked over to the windows. Just then, she got a flash of instinct and took a step back.

※

Travis dashed through the darkness in pursuit of his enemy.

Time and space existed and limited the demon realm, though not in the same ways as in the human realm. Demons, whose forms were more like conceptual entities, simply had a different awareness of those things.

Phaedra had fled the instant she'd sensed Travis's hostility. While they were two of the most powerful demons in existence, she was no match for him in a head-on fight. Unfortunately, catching her when she ran was very difficult.

The end of his long pursuit was nearing, however.

"I've blocked off all your exits. Come out, Phaedra."

His cold, irritated voice rang out in the darkness.

The concept of love was foreign to demons. The closest things they experienced were curiosity and attachment. Travis couldn't abide anyone who wanted to legitimize those as genuine affection.

The woman he was pursuing was no different. Phaedra didn't love him—she only wanted to possess and monopolize him. Travis would never agree to such a boring game. He had found something much more important.

Travis grew irritated at Phaedra's refusal to face him. He let his power rise in preparation for the kill.

"Then you can die," he spat, words sharp like a blade.

Just as the words left his mouth, a blast of searing white light sped toward him.

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Tinasha took a step back only to behold a pillar of golden radiance right before her eyes. The light struck the barrier on the floor and exploded.

"Whoa!" she yelped, leaping away.

Her two spirits conjured a shield to protect her from the blast. As Tinasha cast a defensive spell, Mila and Karr stepped out in front of her.

The surprise attack had penetrated multiple barriers. Tinasha licked her lips nervously.

Karr said tightly, "Run, little girl. We'll buy you some time."

She'd only heard him talk like that once before. Of the twelve mystical spirits, Karr was the second most powerful. Tinasha's eyes grew wide in shock as Mila added, "Please run, Lady Tinasha. I think she's here."

As she spoke, a fearsome and intimidating presence filled the room. Tinasha took in the sight of a woman clad in a blinding, brilliant light and finally realized what was happening. "Oh no..."

The last time Karr had addressed her that way was when Travis had appeared. That meant this woman was of the same rank.

She had gently undulating, long silvery hair and pale blue eyes. There was no doubting her beauty.

Like Tinasha, there was something strange and ephemeral in her features. But hers were twisted with malicious intent.

Her clear eyes glittered ominously as her gaze pierced straight through Tinasha. "Are you that little insect I've heard so much about? Rejoice, for you get to die by my hand."

Tinasha smiled tightly in the face of her death verdict. While trying not to leave herself open in any way, she spared a glance up at the ceiling.

Faced with one of her greatest dilemmas yet, this all-powerful mage and queen's first reaction was a sigh. "Stupid Travis."

Her tone held a pronounced tinge of resignation.

※

As he used both hands to divert the light that came suddenly rushing at him, Travis frowned suspiciously. That attack was far too powerful to have come from Phaedra.

However, he did know who *was* powerful enough to manage it—a man who was also one of the highest-ranking demons.

As he suppressed his annoyance, Travis let a cruel smirk curl his lips. "What do you think you're doing, Taviti? Where did Phaedra go?"

"She's manifested in the human realm," something replied. The other demon had taken no physical shape. Only words alone, infused with his will, filled the space.

Travis clicked his tongue irritably. At some point, his quarry had changed places with someone else. Fury boiled within him for getting so roundly deceived.

The voice continued mockingly, "Perhaps you didn't notice because you've grown so accustomed to wearing that filthy meatsack of a body? Oh, how the mighty have fallen."

"Can it. Why are you here?" snapped Travis.

"I'm simply trying to help cure you of your pathetic addiction to those insects. The dignity of the greatest demons is in jeopardy, and that concerns us all," the voice explained.

Travis smirked. He held his left hand out invitingly, scarlet lightning crackling at his fingertips. "So we agree, then. I'm equally fed up with sharing my position with the likes of *you*."

As Travis poured his emotions into his magic, he thought of two mortals. One was the girl he had sworn to protect.

The other was a woman who possessed enough power to match his own.

Taviti wouldn't let Travis go easily, and Travis didn't intend to run anyway. He meant to give Taviti everything he deserved for standing in his way.

In the meantime, Phaedra must have arrived with great fanfare and devastating might to kill his old friend. In one part of his mind, Travis wondered if he would make it in time or not. Ultimately, he gave up midway through. "Eh, she can probably fend for herself."

Then he unleashed a scarlet bolt of light.

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The room surged with searing bolts of lightning. Karr and Mila worked together to warp the attacks far away.

Phaedra's lips curled in a bitter grin as she beheld their swift teamwork. "You're pretty good for trash who takes orders from a nasty bug."

"Believe it or not, we've been around for a long time," replied Karr with a friendly smirk, though he couldn't hide how tense he was. Unpleasant memories from four hundred years ago, when every mystical spirit had been soundly defeated by one high-ranking demon, flashed through his mind. While Phaedra ranked below that man, she was still one of the strongest of their kind.

Behind Karr, Mila signaled with her eyes to her master. But before Tinasha could respond, a golden shaft of lightning formed in Phaedra's hand. The blood drained from all three of their faces as they beheld that blinding glow.

This one was much more powerful than the one before. One wrong move and half of the entire castle would be rubble.

"Lady Tinasha!" cried Mila, leaping in front of her master to shield her.

Several spells were cast all at once.

Everything went white.

"*Ngh!*"

Tinasha reached out, suppressing the magic that was gushing up.

The next thing she knew, she was hurling through sudden darkness.

Mila was flabbergasted when her beautiful master first announced she was going to put herself in a magic sleep.

Going back in time was impossible. That man had to have lied about coming from the future. So then why was her master putting such stock in it? Why was she so in thrall to this desire that she was attempting to go through time? Mila couldn't understand any part of it.

Many of the other spirits chided Tinasha for it, too. Mila felt confident that they could dissuade her. That changed when Tinasha explained things to her.

A tiny bit of loneliness swam in the darkness of her eyes, and yet they blazed with determination.

It was the first time Mila had ever seen her master with a wish so strong she was intent on having her way.

When Tinasha's pleading gaze, more like a little girl's than a queen's, fell on her, Mila felt herself crumble. With a grimace, she said, "I'll be your guard, then. Trust me to handle everything."

Her master was stunned, as were all the other spirits.

But that didn't bother Mila. A strange sense of duty had come over her, filling her with satisfaction.

That was probably the moment she stopped being a spirit of Tuldarr. So long as her beautiful and entirely unique master existed in this world, she would fight to protect her.

"Mila! Mila! Wake up!"

Someone shook her shoulder, and Mila's eyes opened. Close to nine hundred years had passed since she had taken corporeal form and manifested in this realm; she had adapted completely. She opened and closed her hands over and over, getting a feel for all her senses.

Glancing up, she saw Tinasha and Karr peering down at her with concern. She waved a hand at them and sat up.

They weren't in the palace; they were behind a half-crumbled wall built of stone. Looking around, she realized this was a part of some sprawling ruins.

"Are we in... the old capital?"

"Yes," Tinasha answered. A presence-muffling barrier surrounded them.

Mila recalled what had just happened. "Lady Tinasha, is Phaedra...?"

"I believe she's searching for us," replied the queen with an upward jerk of her chin. No figure was visible in the dark sky, but Mila could sense something out of the ordinary.

During the attack in the study, Tinasha had put up a barrier to enhance the spirits' defenses and had simultaneously teleported everyone out via an array. Their present location was an entirely uninhabited wasteland found south of the main city of Tuldarr.

The stone megaliths that made up the cityscape were all that remained of an era when this had been the center of Tuldarr. Close to five centuries ago, a forbidden curse ran amok and left the city partially destroyed. The survivors relocated to the north. Weathered ruins were all that remained.

A wave of Phaedra's magic wriggled through the skies above like a homing beacon. They wouldn't remain hidden forever.

Mila staggered to her feet. "Sorry, but I'm going to go buy us some time."

"Absolutely not," Tinasha said, rejecting that at once.

Mila gaped at her. "But Lady Tinasha..."

A tender smile appeared on her master's lovely face. "I will go. You two keep the barrier up around this whole area."

Her tone brooked no objections. Fierce determination blazed in her dark eyes.

Mila knew that look well. Since Tinasha was just a girl, she had ruled over them as their queen. In the face of such inviolable majesty, the two spirits bowed their heads.

An amused-sounding peal of laughter rang out from above. "So this is where you are? How sneaky. I found it dreadfully dull."

Tinasha gave a tight smile in response to her enemy's scorn. She spread her arms out wide. "Itz, Senn, Saiha, Lilia, Kunai, Eir, Sylpha!"

The Tuldarr mystical spirits who had served the Magic Empire for nine hundred years answered her summons. All of them materialized around Tinasha, save for the three who always guarded Tuldarr.

Phaedra snorted. "You lot came all this way just to be brought down by my hand?"

The spirits ignored the demon queen's open scorn and looked only at their master, awaiting her orders.

Tinasha flashed them a relaxed smile as a spell formed between her hands. "All of you hold your positions."

Every spirit understood what that meant. Their master had decided to fight alone, and she would permit no dissent. They bowed and vanished.

Immediately after, a barrier sprang up with Tinasha at the center, encapsulating the little city. This barrier, maintained by nine powerful demons, would demarcate the battlefield and prevent any magic from escaping and damaging some other place.

Tinasha took a deep breath of air into her lungs. She held her breath and teleported into the sky, her long black hair fluttering. "I certainly didn't think I would get this opportunity again..."

The spirits weren't the only ones reminded of the battle with Travis. Tinasha still tasted the bitterness of that defeat. She and all of her spirits had only survived at his whim.

But things were different now. Phaedra clearly sought to kill her.

If Tinasha died, the contract with the spirits would end.

She thought back to four hundred years ago, and a smile cracked her lips. If she perished, the spirits might be able to flee. They weren't mere servants to her—they were her friends that she cared for deeply.

Tinasha pulled her mind away from morbid speculation. She was not expecting to lose this fight. Why had Travis come to her with this? If this was just a matter of a capable demon assassin, his underlings probably could have handled it. In all likelihood, he had asked for her help because he'd anticipated a direct confrontation with Phaedra.

"I wish he'd just told me that from the start," she muttered under her breath. Focusing her mind, she eyed the powerful demon queen before her.

I'm one of only a handful of mortals who can defy them.

Tinasha lifted her right hand, and a sword appeared in it. Her eyes traced the length of the blade, which glinted purple.

So quiet only she could hear it, Tinasha whispered, "No matter who I'm up against, I am done losing."

Phaedra smiled pityingly—and yet cruelly—at the mortal woman leveling a sword at her. Her lilting, melodic voice rent the air. "Are you ready for your death? Come and let me kill you quickly, filthy pest. I can't stand this tepid sack of flesh. I want to be home now."

Even the words she spat in disgust carried an alluring charm.

"Yes, I'm ready for *your* death. Please come whenever you're ready," Tinasha replied, undaunted

"Why you little..."

Silvery white and obsidian black clashed. Two women, such opposites in every way, filled the sky with vast and powerful spells.

The two magical forces collided in a flurry of sparks, like a streak of lightning.

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A drop of rain hit the windowpane.

Popping his head up at the sound, Oscar glanced over his shoulder at the window. It was still afternoon, but the sky was dark and gray with heavy clouds. A light rain began to fall, dripping down onto the trees in the gardens.

The king sighed as he picked up a pen to sign a few documents. "Should I have gone to Ynureid in the morning?"

"The weather's been ghastly all day," Lazar pointed out.

The new fortress at Ynureid was mostly complete, and Oscar had plans to head there for an inspection. The structure was entirely protected from the rain, so that wouldn't hamper anything, but a lack of sunlight would make things fairly annoying.

Still, that was no reason for him to change his plans. Oscar got to his feet. "Guess I'll go get ready."

"Yes, Your Majesty," responded Lazar, opening the study door to go and help his liege make his preparations. But once he looked out into the corridor, he froze. "Aaah!"

Oscar frowned when he heard Lazar's shriek of terror. "What is it?"

"Th-the baby..."

Oscar peered over Lazar's shoulder to see the baby, wrapped in swaddling cloth, lying on the floor right outside the door. His blue marble eyes stared straight at Oscar.

"What's he doing here? Who's the lady-in-waiting in charge of watching him?" asked Oscar.

"I—I'm not sure... That really scared me. He's not even crying, so we have no way of knowing how long he's been there," said Lazar.

"This is ridiculous. Take him away, and I'll get ready on my own," Oscar said.

Heeding his king's orders, Lazar picked up the baby and headed for the drawing room where the ladies-in-waiting could be found.

Oscar turned to go the other way, unaware that the infant was watching him the entire time.

Ynureid's walls were wet with the drizzle.

Because Oscar had completed the majority of the inspection earlier, after the battle with Cezar, he only needed to inspect the storehouses, the armory, and the overall defense of the fortress.

Oscar was in a council room with General Granfort and other military personnel and magistrates when an officer entered wearing a bewildered look. "Your Majesty, a visitor has arrived for you..."

"A visitor? Here? Who is it?" Oscar asked.

"She says her name is Lady Aurelia of Gandona, sire."

He recognized the name. It was difficult to forget the girl who had accompanied that demon bastard.

What did she want, though? With a scowl, Oscar asked, "Is her companion with her?"

"No, she is here alone. It appears she's come on urgent business."

"Very well, then. I'll go see her," said Oscar.

Normally, he would have no obligation to meet with someone from another country, especially one who arrived without an appointment. But if Aurelia claimed it was pressing, then he had to listen. After clearing out all but a handful of magistrates from the chamber, Oscar gave orders to have her brought in.

When Aurelia entered, she apologized for rudely arriving unannounced. Then, with a steely look in her eye, she got right down to business. "Your Majesty, do you know where Travis is?"

"Excuse me?" was all Oscar could say, utterly flabbergasted by that question. "I have no idea. I haven't seen him since the party."

"It's been more than a week since he left me. He said he'd be right back, but I don't know where he's gone... Nothing like this has ever happened before," she explained, gazing earnestly at Oscar.

The king of Farsas frowned. If it had been a week, then that meant Travis had departed shortly after the celebration in Farsas. It wasn't surprising to learn Aurelia was fretting, but he couldn't see what it had to do with him. Besides, that man was one of the highest-ranking demons. Oscar couldn't think of much that would be a threat to him. Travis had likely flitted back to the demon realm on a whim.

Oscar was about to say as much to Aurelia when the next part of her explanation stunned him silent. "I thought Queen Tinasha might know

where he'd gone, so I went to Tuldarr. But she's not there, either... No one knows where she's gone, so I thought she might be with you."

"No... she's not. I haven't seen her since the day of the party, either. So she's gone missing?" he asked.

"I was told she was in her study until the afternoon but has since vanished. There are burn marks in the room, so some manner of magic may have been used..."

Unconsciously, Oscar began to grind his teeth.

Something didn't add up. And this feeling was oddly familiar.

Tinasha had been acting suspiciously after the party, too. And Travis had disappeared on the same night. Something had been off about Tinasha, and now she'd vanished as well.

Maybe he was worrying too much, but Oscar began to have a bad feeling that something had happened.

He needed to look into things immediately and act before it was too late.

Rising to his feet, he glanced at his magistrates. With a sour look on his face, he said, "I'm sorry, but I have to go to Tuldarr. I'll finish the inspection another day."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" the magistrates responded right away.

In sharp contrast, Aurelia leaped up in surprise. To her, Oscar said, "You've got me worried now, so I'm going to have a look. Once I've arrived in Tuldarr, I'll have my dragon track Tinasha down. I'll contact you when I know something."

"I—I'm going, too!" Aurelia insisted.

Now it was Oscar's turn to look flabbergasted. His eyebrows shot up as he replied, "We don't know what's at the root of this. I can't be responsible for your safety."

"I'm a mage. Take me with you, please," she pleaded.

"But you may become the enemy," he said.

"What enemy?"

Aurelia was confused; she didn't quite understand what Oscar meant. Was he implying that the two of them might wind up as foes? Or that she and Tinasha would be? It was difficult to imagine, and Aurelia wasn't sure how to answer.

While she was sorting her thoughts out, the king cut in coolly. "The man you're searching for is the most suspicious one in all of this. Two times now, he's almost killed Tinasha simply because he felt like it."

"He has?"

"And if he's trying to do the same thing again, you should know that I *will* end him. And if you come along, what will you end up doing then?"

"Travis really did that...?" Aurelia asked with disbelief. Were Oscar's words true? Had Travis almost killed Tinasha?

Her eyes darted here and there frantically. She wasn't catching glimpses of another's past, but rather, she was rifling through her own memories.

Yes, Travis was bad-natured and enjoyed upsetting others. But over the last six years they had spent together, he had never once caused her physical harm. When he'd admitted to "riling" Tinasha up before, Aurelia never imagined the truth of that statement was so dark.

Aurelia knew what Travis really was, though, and she understood that he had a tendency to regard mortals with very little care.

Still, that couldn't be all there was to it.

When Aurelia glanced up, Oscar was staring her down with a fierce, commanding gaze. She looked down and away, her face turning sorrowful. "What he did was inexcusable. I know it's not something that an apology can solve, but do allow me to say I'm very sorry..."

"There's nothing *you* need to apologize for," Oscar pointed out, suppressing a sigh. This was a tricky situation. Aurelia was a member of the Gandonan royal family, so he couldn't ignore or offend her, but her sudden visit had brought a significant upset.

Oscar puzzled over how to deal with her, and the girl showed no signs of backing down. "If he *is* about to fight Tinasha, I will stop him. I promise I won't get in your way. Please take me with you."

Desperation was written all over her face. Her delicate, fragile frame emanated pure determination.

Seeing her like this gave Oscar the strangest sense of déjà vu. He realized he was thinking of his fiancée and the way she would set her jaw and step forward, vowing not to lose. Despite the inherent awkwardness in that posturing, it was difficult for Oscar to ignore it.

Feeling himself break into a faint smile, Oscar sidestepped the girl to get to the door. "If you're a mage, then you should be able to look after yourself."

"Th-that's right!" she cried, running after the king as he opened the door.

Then Oscar froze.

"What's wrong?" the girl asked, peeking over his shoulder.

There, in the hallway, lay the baby, wrapped in swaddling cloth.



At her core, Tinasha hated battles.

Since before her original coronation, she had constantly found herself entangled in a maelstrom of conflicts almost daily. Despite having the power to destroy an entire country overnight if she wanted to, she seldom wielded her full capabilities in battle. Even in the war with Tayiri, she was undecided to the last over whether she should mobilize all her strength and decimate the opposing army.

For that reason, Tinasha was actually almost grateful when the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned came to kill her. Fighting a witch eliminated the

indecision on whether to marshal all her power. For the first time, she brought out the whole might of her magic to slay her enemy.

The clash lasted for an entire day. The fierce showdown was on a scale that had never been seen before, with the mystical spirits and witch's demon servants in the fray as well.

And when Tinasha killed the witch at last, she stood stock-still on the ravaged earth, devastated by the ruin of it all. The first stirrings of doubt flickered through her heart. Was Tinasha not a witch herself, to be capable of wielding such immense power?

While Tinasha's right hand loosed a spell, her left swept through the air, setting off a wave of magic that neutralized the golden thorns flying at her from all directions. Phaedra growled in irritation that Tinasha had used the smallest bit of power to stop all her attacks. The demon queen scowled and was halfway through casting a new spell when she was suddenly yanked down by her ankles.

"What in the—?"

Innumerable silver threads were coiled around Phaedra's legs, pulling her down through the air and throwing her off balance. After struggling to free herself from the restraints, she made a split-second decision and applied the spell she was casting to herself.

No sooner had Phaedra done so than Tinasha sent forth black flames that engulfed the demon.

The fire should have been enough to incinerate Phaedra down to her bones, but it fizzled before it had the chance. Free of the flames and silver threads, Phaedra glowered at Tinasha with fury burning in her eyes.

"You impertinent little..."

She had thought this *insect* beneath her. And her wounded pride only fueled her bloodlust.

"Tch," Tinasha tutted. "I suppose it was never going to be that easy. Let's try this, then."

Another spell took shape. It turned into nine spears that zoomed for Phaedra at staggering speeds. The demon shattered the first furiously, but the other eight evaded her attacks and arranged themselves in midair.

"Miserable little worm!" Phaedra howled.

"Call me whatever you like while you still can," Tinasha said, carefully controlling the trajectories of the remaining spears. Then her focus happened to shift to Phaedra's right leg. Rivulets of blood were running down the white flesh, the result of the silver threads previously wrapped tightly around it. The wound must have been deep, because the crimson streams thickened, dripping down before scattering on the breeze.

"Hmm?" Tinasha mused. As Phaedra smashed the last spear, Tinasha teleported away. A second later, a bolt of lightning struck the spot where she'd been.

Time slowed to a crawl, and Tinasha's world narrowed until there was only the battle—anticipating and acting. She felt her own mind gradually

grow sharper and sharper. Her next spell came with no recitation, then she crafted a double incantation on top of it.

"All right, here I go," she whispered before releasing three spells at once. As a faint, arrows rained down on Phaedora. When she blocked them with a magical barrier, a silver ball of light whizzed through it at breakneck speed and closed in on her.

"Ugh!" the demon growled. Although she raised her hand, she was unable to muster a complete defense. She leaped to one side to try and elude the attack but found that she couldn't move. Her eyes grew wide with shock and panic. Myriad vines held her firmly from behind. She wouldn't make it.

The ball of light struck Phaedora and swallowed her. As Tinasha put up a hand to shield herself from the blinding white glow, she giggled. "You've still got more in you, don't you? Go on and show me what else you're capable of."

She was high on the exhilaration of battle. The spells ricocheting around the space were more beautiful than anything.

Tinasha read her enemy's next move. Her thoughts were clear.

A natural grin spread across the queen of Tuldarr's face; her mind now honed to a razor-sharp edge. That beatific, gracious expression carried with it the power to enchant all who beheld it.

The light that had consumed Phaedora exploded. The woman who emerged from it wore a bone-chilling smile as she faced her opponent. "Of course... I will take great pleasure in breaking down every meaning in this world for you."

The demon cast her eyes downward. Hundreds of sickles materialized in the air without an incantation. Tinasha beamed at such a sublime sight.

Immediately, the golden crescent-shaped blades arced through the air, racing toward Tinasha.

While channeling magic into her sword in one hand, the queen created beads of light in the other. She leaped backward and used her blade to dispatch the sickles rushing at her. As she did, the orb of light formed argent streaks in the sky as they shot down the remaining crescents.

Despite not being consciously aware of it, Tinasha knew the paths all of Phaedora's projectiles were taking. She could fully perceive each and every bit of magic in the space the two women were in. If things continued as they were, she might just manage to overpower the demon.

But then, something made the faintest of impacts with Tinasha's magic. "What was that?"

Her moment of discomposure allowed an attack to connect with her.

"Ow!" she cried as pain lanced through her right arm. From the corner of her eye, Tinasha saw her sword fall from her grip and tumble to the ground. Sickles seized upon the gap in her concentration, grazing her chest and left leg.

Wasting no time, Tinasha cast a spell, and hundreds of luminous beads appeared in front of her heart.

"Go!"

The globules scattered, flying at the crescent blades and crashing into them explosively. In the chaos, Tinasha teleported away and used magic to stop her bleeding. Upon inspecting her deepest wound, she found that her arm was torn to shreds from the elbow up. Her tendons might've been snapped because she couldn't move her fingers very well.

"Oh? Whatever is the matter?" Phaedra asked with great amusement.

"Nothing at all. I'm only feeling a little sleepy," Tinasha replied, purposely smiling back.

Inwardly, however, she was far from calm. Something had touched the defensive barrier placed on Oscar, which had distracted her and created that opening.

His barrier vibrating meant that something had attacked him with magic. What in the world was going on?

"Oscar..."

I want to go to him right now. I want to make sure he's okay.

Tinasha had to dismiss that idea, though.

If she warped away now, Phaedra would follow. And to fight outside the space she had enclosed, which the spirits were keeping warded, would mean extraordinary damage. She couldn't allow that.

Tinasha took a deep breath. Then a brilliant grin split her face. She used magic to make her immobilized arm stretch out toward Phaedra.

I believe in him.

From birth to death, humans were all alone in the world. Only thoughts and feelings, as fine and fragile as spider silk, linked them together.

Right now, winning this fight was Tinasha's goal.

She would believe in him, and she would defeat her enemy.

"At the moment, you have my full attention. So how about a smile for me?" Tinasha purred.

Power amassed in the young woman's right hand. A dark crevice rent the air between them.

Phaedra's lips curled up. Her gaze was locked onto the mark on Tinasha's flesh, exposed when a sickle had grazed her chest earlier. "That hateful mark. What does he see in you?"

"Oh, who knows, really?"

The crevice grew wide enough that the tip of it reached Phaedra, who forcibly compressed it with a spray of magical sparks.

The demon queen licked her lips with a bloodred tongue. "Then what is it about him that entices you?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't say," Tinasha responded tartly. She was simply a stand-in for Aurelia. She wouldn't have the faintest clue what was attractive about Travis. She found herself drawn to a different sort of bright light altogether. "I doubt any answer I gave would be satisfying."

Tinasha flung out her right hand, sending the blood on her arm flying. As she did, a dark bolt surged out of the half-closed crevice and made for Phaedra, forking off many times over into a network of jagged lines. The sparking cage closed around the demon queen. Phaedra scowled in distaste at this attack from the most powerful mortal mage. Spreading her arms wide, she produced a luminous golden sphere.

Branches of black lightning licked Phaedra's skin and left shallow cuts on it as the ball of light pulled them inside, absorbing them. "Repugnant child of the spirits... That nasty, lukewarm body of yours will not fall under his control. I'll slaughter you first, until not a single drop of blood remains."

After swallowing the lightning, the golden orb turned a murky black.

Tinasha kept an eye on the situation while her right hand moved in the air. A sword the color of night formed in her grip. She calmed her mind while readying her weapon made of pure magic.

The world of the senses that is revealed to me is so very clear.

Nothing was warped or distorted, nor marred or stained.

She was alive, now and at this moment. She was in good spirits. Her senses were sharp, her magic was polished to a sheen, and her spells were developing beautifully. All of it gave her great joy.

Eyes dancing, Tinasha faced Phaedra. "My body is my own. Only I and one other may lay a hand on it."

"Shut up, filthy worm!" Phaedra cried, hurling her conjured sphere.

With a full, throaty laugh, Tinasha leaped out in front of the demon.

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After a blank moment, Oscar finally came to his senses and looked around the hallway.

There was no one there but the baby. Lazar was still back at Farsas Castle.

"Then who brought him here?" Oscar muttered.

The infant stared silently at Oscar. Anxiety surged through the man as he caught a glimpse of some bottomless darkness in the child's blue eyes.

"What's that? A baby?" Aurelia asked, slipping around Oscar and reaching out for the infant on the floor. However, Oscar grabbed her arm to stop her.

"Your Majesty?"

"There's something off about that child. Don't touch it," Oscar cautioned, his judgment informed by his intuition alone. Tinasha had said there was nothing particularly dubious about the baby, but she only meant in a magical sense. She was just as suspicious as he was of why a baby addressed to him was abandoned now of all times.

This is no abandoned newborn. It's after me.

Tapping a finger against his jaw as he puzzled over how to handle the situation, Oscar watched something bizarre happen. A black mist rose from

the baby, climbing slowly toward the king. Instinctively, he reached for Akashia.

Aurelia screamed, "Your Majesty, don't touch it!"

Oscar's eyebrows shot up at her shrill cry. He pulled her back and shut the door on the baby. As he kept a wary eye on the door, he asked her, "What was that?"

"It's a very strong miasma," she replied. "If you touch it, you may be poisoned. What is that... baby...?"

Aurelia trailed off, her ashy blue eyes going wide as saucers. Oscar followed her gaze to the door and was just as stunned.

The massive door was slowly being dissolved from the other side, as if by a spray of acid. A small hole was developing in the wood. Groaning at the sight of black vapor seeping in, Oscar took a half step back and checked all around him.

The magistrates were staring back at the king with a mixture of fear and distress in their eyes. Faced with an unexpected emergency, Oscar made a split-second decision. "Everyone, get to the wall."

As he spoke, he edged closer to the window. Opening it, he peered down. They were on the second floor, not too far from the ground.

"Pardon, Your Majesty?!"

"It's probably after me. I'm going to draw it away, so you do as I say," the king ordered, pointing to a door set in the wall opposite the windows. It connected to another council room, and if the magistrates exited that way, they should be able to avoid the baby and escape into the hallway.

Oscar already had one foot on the windowsill when Aurelia touched him and said a short incantation.

The next thing he knew, they were both teleported to a grassy field south of the fortress of Ynureid.

Oscar frowned as he stared at the fortress far in the distance. "Thanks for saving me, but what about everyone in that room?"

"I apologize for acting so rashly. However, I don't think we need to worry about them," Aurelia said with a tight smile, pointing in the opposite direction from the fort.

The baby was floating there, a black mist coiling around it. It had warped over in pursuit of them.

"If Lazar were here, he'd faint immediately," Oscar whispered, tilting his head and frowning at the infant. Fortunately, they were surrounded by open grassland. Deciding to fight, the king pulled out Akashia.

"Can you teleport out of here? Go back to the fortress or Gandona," Oscar said to Aurelia, without taking his eyes off the baby.

The girl shook her head, however. "I'll help you. I'm not as good a mage as Tinasha, but I can still be of use."

Oscar wanted to order her to go anyway but gave it up when he saw the look in her eyes. He adjusted his grip on the royal sword. "I guess I'll take you up on the offer, then. Thanks."

"I am at your service," she replied.

The baby regarded them silently. Oscar's lip curled when he noticed that the black gas seeping out from the infant was withering the plants around it. "It sure *looks* like a human baby."

"It does to me, too, but that miasma... It's definitely coming from the child," Aurelia replied.

There was no spell visible in the vapor. It simply billowed from the baby, slowly covering more and more.

Oscar glanced between the baby and the blade of the royal sword. "Never killed a kid before."

The child wasn't a demon in disguise. Whatever he was doing, he was still human.

At the bitterness in Oscar's tone, Aurelia bit her lip. "Your Majesty, could you try stalling to give me some time?"

"Do you have a plan?"

"I'd like to search the baby's memories. They may hint at some way of banishing the miasma," she replied.

Oscar's surprise lasted only a moment. He took a step forward to cover Aurelia. "Got it. I'll buy you some time."

He didn't need to ask for details. Aurelia wouldn't have proposed the feat if she weren't capable of it.

Oscar dashed in and used Akashia to dispel the surrounding gas. The black mist dissipated at the touch of his blade. Some weakly drifting remnants made contact with his arm, but Tinasha's defensive barrier repelled them.

"Let the past come to my sight."

Aurelia closed her eyes. Travis had locked away the abnormal ability that had ruined her life.

And now, of her own volition, she was setting it free.

No matter what kind of power it was, it was her own. Aurelia wanted to find meaning in it. She wanted to believe she was making progress, even with this smallest of steps. Oscar was covering her without questioning a thing, which Aurelia was very grateful for. And she had to honor that trust by giving this everything she could.

Aurelia fixed her gray-blue eyes on the baby. While maintaining control of herself, she sent her consciousness into the time contained within that small creature.

At first, the miasma had no clear shape and merely undulated slowly, but once it seemingly realized that it could not catch Oscar that way, it began to shift its form.

A cone-tipped spear lunged forth out of the mist. Oscar lopped it off with his sword and leaped to one side. While preserving a reasonable distance, he kept its attention focused on him. He couldn't let it grab Aurelia, who was standing some distance away.

The girl's eyes were blank as she stared at the baby within the miasma. Oscar turned away, deliberately not watching. While he didn't know what she was looking at, he had the distinct sense that she would peer into something even he didn't know about himself. Eye contact felt like a bad idea.

After deftly handling a series of attacks that came at unstable speeds, Oscar heard the girl calling for him and fell back.

Aurelia walked up to him. As she put up a barrier, she asked, "Do you know what Simila is?"

"Sure," Oscar replied. "That's the forbidden curse Cezar tried to use just recently. I believe Tinasha said it uses people's negative emotions as a core and draws out power from another plane of existence."

"It's a forbidden curse?!" Aurelia yelled in shock. Evidently, she hadn't known about Simila at all. But her question informed Oscar that their current situation was related to a forbidden curse.

Nervously, she relayed her findings. "That baby has some leftover remnants that weren't molded into Simila sealed inside him. He's been made into an instrument to assassinate you. The remains are a formless mass of evil... or maybe negative emotions? Anyway, because of that, they've evaded magical detection. They're attached to the baby through a mark drawn on his back. If you can destroy that..."

"Oh, so the power can be separated from him? Got it. Thanks." The king responded easily, then he strode from the safety of Aurelia's barrier. The girl's jaw dropped.

Though Oscar knew what he had to do, the baby was surrounded by a massive cloud of deadly fog, *and* the mark was on his back. Achieving the best scenario without dying or killing the child wasn't going to be easy.

Yet Oscar wasn't worried about any of that as he approached the baby. In contrast, Aurelia fretted over what she should do. But soon enough, she widened the barrier to prevent the miasma from coming closer to him.

Oscar chuckled when he noticed her assistance. "You're a mage, all right. That's a big help."

As he moved forward, Oscar dispelled any harmful vapor Aurelia's barrier couldn't push away. By this point, the miasma had come into contact with Tinasha's protective spell numerous times, yet the woman herself hadn't come running. That must've meant she was also tied up somewhere.

"She's probably gotten herself injured again. I've gotta hurry," Oscar muttered, steadying out his breathing. He touched a hand to his chest, wondering for a moment if he should use what was in his breast pocket.

"No, I bet I can make do without it," he decided, only needing a second to make up his mind.

Brandishing Akashia before him, Oscar breached the center of the miasma. The black mist formed spears and cudgels to attack him relentlessly. Oscar sliced them all away handily, however, and continued his advance.

But little by little, the vast miasma was seeping in from beyond Aurelia's barrier. Black droplets clung to Oscar. They weakened upon contact with Tinasha's enchantment, but as they were made of negative human emotions and not magic, they slowly permeated that layer of protection and burned him like acid.

Pain spread from Oscar's left shoulder down his arm, but he didn't let it stop him. Instead, he only quickened his pace.

He was now a few steps away from the baby. Oscar's twilight blue eyes met the baby's brighter aqua ones.

A void with no thoughts or feelings.

The birthplace of darkness.

The next thing Oscar knew, he was getting sucked into that dark world.

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He could sense the flow of power like a frequency. Splitting his consciousness apart, Travis managed to manipulate it.

Unlike in the human realm, where the structure of a spell was required to exercise magic, the energy spilled forth from every corner here. In this place, force of will was the only thing required.

An invisible snake pursued Taviti, who kept disappearing and reappearing.

"Don't think you can shake me off, you worthless nobody," grumbled Travis as he flicked a hand. The serpent divided into five. While he was back in his original incorporeal form, he still felt like blood was rushing up within him.

It was at that moment that an army of murky red hands crawled up toward him from underfoot. As fast as a winged beast, they twined around his legs. The crimson hands immediately began to corrode him from the inside out, and the changes triggered a wave of nausea.

From seemingly nowhere, Taviti spoke in a blasé tone. "You've always been all talk, with nothing to back it up. It's the act of a fool to bluff that you're more than you are."

Despite Taviti's mocking words, Travis wore a dauntless smile. "Enough yapping. You'll find out whether it's bluster or not when you're dead."

Travis used the strength of his mind to reshape his body. He cut out the corroded parts and regenerated new ones. All the hands clinging to him were blown off.

Taviti's astonishment filtered into the area.

Travis manipulated his power to deal the finishing blow. "Gloat too much, and you're just *asking* to have your throat torn out," he stated, his voice dripping with evident scorn.

When Taviti turned around, two snakes lunged for him with their jaws open wide.

"How can this be happening?" Valt wondered with a sigh. He adjusted the barriers strung up all over. Instead of raking his nails through his hair in a panic, he was leaning against the armrest of his chair, resting his chin on one hand. "This has gotten a little out of hand. I didn't think any top-ranking demons would show up."

"Is one fighting? With the witch?"

"Seems so. It looks like they're in the old Tuldarr capital ruins."

"No! Will the spell be all right?" asked the girl.

Valt knocked on the wood of the armrest. "Just barely... I think. She's got the area warded off and all."

He grimaced as he withdrew magic from the barriers. Valt, Oscar and Tinasha's prime suspect, was presently living with Miralys in a new mansion.

Miralys blew on her sweetened tea to cool it down. She was sitting in her favorite wooden chair, brought from Cezar. "So what's the Farsas king doing?"

"He's engaged in a conflict of his own. Some sort of revenge plot by the remaining cultists. Those two have no shortage of enemies, do they?" remarked Valt.

"Aren't you responsible for at least half of them?" Miralys pointed out.

"Well, that is true..."

Valt folded his arms. The situation had taken a strange turn while he'd been off getting his plans in order. He turned his thoughts to the surprise appearance of the high-ranking demons.

Naturally, he knew that Tinasha and Travis were acquaintances. But unlike Tinasha, who was relatively easy to predict, Travis was prone to attracting unforeseen developments. That had caused trouble for Valt numerous times in the past. It had even gotten him killed on a few occasions.

Schemes that involved Travis were far too risky, and Valt had long since given up on using him. Fortunately, things were better now, because a girl named Aurelia had come along to weigh Travis down and balance things out.

Miralys snapped her fingers, and Valt popped his head up.

"What do you want to do? Should we help? You don't want the witch to die, right?" she asked.

"No... but actually, I think we can stay out of this. This is a good opportunity, so I'll just watch things play out," he answered.

"Are you sure?"

"Mm-hmm. If she dies here, it means she's not strong enough. And if that's the case, it's all pointless anyway," Valt stated, drawing a coolheaded conclusion. Suppressing his emotions, he closed his eyes.

The world was constantly moving in new and unexpected ways.

And though it was far from comfortable, they stood in the midst of the tremors from those battering waves.

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Tinasha sliced through Phaedra's magic attacks.

Naturally, there was no ground to stand upon in midair. It was magic that kept her upright. With concentration, Tinasha adjusted her footing so that it was the same as when she was on land.

Reining in all the emotions that felt like they were about to spill forth, she brought her sword down on Phaedra. The demon woman raised her hands, seething with resentment. When the dark sword and Phaedra's magic connected, the atmosphere exploded with a loud, unpleasant crackling.

Tinasha took a step closer and thrust her sword toward Phaedra's left flank. The blade hit her defensive barrier and stopped.

"Corrode."

Tinasha quietly intoned a spell and infused her weapon with even more power. The black blade started to eat through the barrier, and Phaedra paled. Her hand hurriedly wove a spell to drive it back.

"Vanish!"

Light flooded out. As magic surged up to attack her from head to toe, Tinasha released her sword. Shielding her head and heart with her arms, she teleported away.

A light euphoria had overtaken her. The heat of it was what propelled her forward.

Impatience and anticipation were the same—the wish to move forward immediately. She wanted to see how everything played out, and it was impossible to stop now.

Phaedra watched Tinasha retreat with satisfaction, but she froze upon catching sight of something in those dark eyes staring back at her.

"You..."

It was the gaze of a bloodthirsty beast. A pure urge to kill glittered there. Tinasha had gone straight into a mad, murderous trance.

How could someone look at one of the most powerful demons in such a way? Phaedra couldn't comprehend it.

I'm scared.

Those dark eyes cast a shadow on Phaedra's mind. And while she was briefly preoccupied, a flurry of black daggers ripped through her skin. Tinasha had turned the sword she'd dropped into tiny little shards.

In the blink of an eye, Phaedra was as battered as Tinasha, shaking all over with the humiliation of it. She detested the warm, red beads that soaked into her clothing. "How *dare* you... I will tear you into a thousand pieces and drown you in a pool of your own blood!"

Tinasha gave a gracious smile. "Too much anger can kill you."

Phaedra had only minor lacerations. Truthfully, Tinasha's injury was more serious. She was in greater pain than the demon, and she could only move her deadened right hand with magic. Other parts of her ached terribly, too.

But even so, she was not worried.

Every drop of her power was at her command, and she loosed it with impunity.

This was different from the silent irritation she'd felt when battling Travis. She was in the midst of effortlessly challenging someone who outranked her. Something about that got her fired up.

Tinasha turned a heated, hungry gaze on Phaedra. Pale blue eyes blazing with fury glared back as the young queen held out a hand.

"I command you to come forth, o curse-adorned illusions. Render definitions meaningless and revert matter."

Three white rings appeared as the result of that incantation. They were composed of what looked like rows of letters, all intertwined around the same center.

The sky was dark, threatening to rain at any moment.

The rings sparkled brightly in that monochromatic world.

"What is that?" Tinasha wondered. It was clearly powerful magic, but she couldn't say what it might do. She uttered an incantation of her own, erecting a barrier to protect herself.

The rings activated before she could complete her spell, however. Revolving as they expanded, they suddenly warped to her position, hemming her in.

"Ah!"

The atmosphere within the rings grew twisted, and Tinasha felt a wave of nausea, as if the air pressure was changing. The instant Tinasha realized what was going on, a chill ran down her spine.

This technique was one that could distort any magic. Every spell cast within the space encircled by the rings would be transmuted or rendered ineffective. Tinasha had never heard of anything capable of twisting the laws of magic and the workings of spells like this. It was hard not to marvel at such unbelievable power and artistry.

Unfortunately, she didn't have the luxury of doing so. Her half-deployed barrier disappeared. That wasn't all. The spells she had cast to stop her bleeding and to hold herself aloft in midair contorted, assailing her with a wave of intense dizziness and nausea.

"Oh no..."

Tinasha stumbled; she couldn't keep herself floating. As she lurched to one side and began to plummet to the ground, Phaedra watched with a smug smile. The demon queen summoned a whirling mass of wind directly above Tinasha to deal the final blow.

"I suppose you did provide me with a modicum of entertainment," she spat.

Tinasha tried to cast a teleportation spell, but the magic wouldn't hold within the rings. The winds pressed down on the rings, accelerating her descent.

A moment later, Tinasha slammed into the center of the ruins with a sickening crunch. The impact sent a cloud of sand into the air. Phaedra teleported down, alighting onto the top of a pile of rubble and gazing upon Tinasha scornfully. "You really made me go to quite some lengths."

As the dust settled, a mass of long black hair sticking out of a pile of broken stone became visible.

Phaedra snorted, raking fingers through her own mussed locks to smooth them out. She positively abhorred the sensation of warmth from the blood coating her skin. "What brittle little bodies. So very loathsome."

As the demon wrapped her arms around the human body she had taken, something suddenly rammed into her and set her trembling.

Very slowly, she looked down at herself and saw a purple blade sticking out of her chest, stabbed into her from behind. She watched in disbelief as blood dripped down the length of it.

Behind her, someone said placidly, "Thank you for showing me how fun a fight can be."

"But you... How did you...?" Phaedra sputtered, her gaze still fixed on that long black hair below.

It should've been impossible, but someone was indeed standing behind her. Phaedra craned her neck around for a better look.

Tinasha yanked out the sword and fell back. Her glossy black hair had been chopped off just above her shoulders; her eyes glowed like a predator's.

"I'm grateful to have witnessed such an incredibly rare spell. However, only one person has the right to kill me. I'm sorry," stated the queen of Tuldarr as she used one hand to flip back her short hair.

When she was slammed against the ground, Tinasha had released raw magic to protect herself. Even so, she'd broken one leg, and several of her ribs felt funny. Only her tremendous power had kept her body together.

Phaedra slowly turned around. When she attempted to cast an attack spell, her vision went dark. She scowled.

Tinasha smiled as she watched the demon woman's face blanch. "You can't move very well, can you? I don't think you're used to how human bodies work. Too much blood loss makes them very cumbersome."

Tinasha had first noticed it when the vines cut Phaedra's leg. The demon must have numbed her sense of pain, so she didn't notice the blood flowing freely from her wounds or do anything to stop it.

The first thing a mage did when wounded in battle was to stop the bleeding and dull the pain. Failing to do both risked disrupting their concentration. Phaedra had only done the latter, so Tinasha made her

opponent bleed out with shallow cuts all over. In particular, she had targeted Phaedra's back, as the demon wouldn't notice any lacerations there. Bright red liquid coated everything from her shoulder blades down.

Even more blood gushed out onto Phaedra's back from the stab wound.

The demon queen glared hatefully at Tinasha. "This substance is so... filthy..."

"Really? A warm body's not that bad, is it? I like this temperature. Not to worry, though. You'll go cold soon enough," replied Tinasha.

"You're the one who's going to die!" Phaedra screamed as a silver light flashed in midair. But with a short incantation, Tinasha negated it. A stroke of her sword tore the demon apart.

Crimson stained Phaedra's lovely silver hair. Drops got into her eyes as well, turning her vision red. Her lips trembled. She was so heavy and chilly.

Was she really going to perish *here*? Of all places?

There was no answer.

Her vision went black, and Phaedra shivered with fear like a child and closed her eyes.

Tinasha sighed as she watched her opponent collapse onto a pile of rubble. Phaedra's body lay twisted like a broken doll's. Black mist emanated from her corpse and melted into the air. Such was the death of a high-ranking demon.

"I will go on while you sleep in this city," Tinasha said, her eyes watching the sky.

Rain had begun to fall.

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Taviti fled into a space sealed off by darkness. Travis's snakes snapped at his heels, chasing him from behind and from the sides.

He hadn't anticipated that Travis would be so much stronger than he was. He'd dismissed his fellow demon as someone too used to living in human skin. At the very least, he'd assumed they would be evenly matched.

However, that had quickly been revealed to be delusional thinking. All he could do now was shake Travis off and hide.

After teleporting away so many times, Taviti despaired when he emerged from his latest attempt only to find Travis's serpents already there waiting for him. "Dammit!"

He manipulated his power, sending out invisible vines to crush the snakes. But the tendrils struck at nothing.

"Convert."

There was nothing there. At a cruel man's instruction, the twelve serpents reappeared and changed form. A glowing white cage took shape, trapping Taviti inside.

The demon, caught inside its tremendous power, was aghast. "What the hell is this?"

"Fun, isn't it? A mortal woman invented it. It divides into multiple hexes and makes a single cage," Travis explained after appearing outside the cage. He wore a caustic grin as he regarded his old acquaintance. There was no mercy to be found in his eyes. He proclaimed, "This is the end. You can die screaming."

He snapped his fingers, and the cage glowed brilliantly as it began to collapse.

Contrary to Travis's hopes, Taviti didn't scream. He disappeared into the white light until not a speck of him was left.

With a bored look on his face, Travis took his leave.

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There was only darkness for as far as he could see. Oscar scanned the space, unaware of how long he had been there or how he had gotten there.

The royal sword was in his hand, but he had nothing else.

Within the boundless gloom, he could sense many wriggling things.

"What's that?" he called, the words serving to reinforce his identity. They separated him from the squirming entities. He was a drop that had fallen into an inky sea.

"All the same," the wriggling things whispered.

Resentment, resignation, and grief—they were all connected. They were all the same. So was this ocean of negativity, as well as whatever fell into it.

Their whispers gave Oscar the answer. "I see... So these are people's darker emotions."

The instant he realized that, his memories came flooding back. He recalled what he was.

Readjusting his grip on the sword, he slowly turned to face the endless waves of negativity pressing on him.

"Just go to sleep," they whispered.

"Sadness never ends," they whispered.

"We are all the same, so join us," they whispered, reaching out for him with immaterial hands.

Oscar's only reply was, "Don't feed me your lies. I'm different from you."

Even if all this wickedness had originated from humans like him, he couldn't stay here. He would keep going.

Resentment, resignation, and grief were not worth giving in to and relinquishing oneself to. He would not surrender to anyone.

As the scraps of darkness attempted to latch on to Oscar, he declared, "You'll never have me. Return to your homes, you ugly things!"

He slashed with Akashia, creating a rip in the endless darkness. Air rushed in.

Many teeming invisible membranes passed through him, and the world changed color rapidly. He was riding a rushing torrent.

No—it only felt that way.

It emboldened him to step forward, regardless. With another slash of Akashia, his vision cleared.

Oscar was back in the grassy field. Amid the vapor that was so thick he could barely make out his out hands, he found the baby and reached for him.

"Your Majesty!" Aurelia cried.

"It's all right," Oscar assured her. Miasma seeped in from everywhere through the gaps in Aurelia's barrier. It melted through his clothes and burned his skin when it touched his arms and chest. But Oscar didn't falter once.

He held the baby to his chest and glanced down at the infant's back. When he undid the buttons on the child's clothing, it revealed a black mark right in the center of his spine.

"Be a good boy now... Bear with it for a little," Oscar whispered. With a little sigh, he dragged Akashia's blade gingerly along the forbidden curse sigil.

The mark's outline shifted. Oscar heard a loud ringing in his ears, and the baby's eyes flew open.

The change was instantaneous and dramatic.

The cloud of black mist burst open from the center outward. Aurelia let out a cry of wonder.

Now that the vapor was dispersed, it gradually faded until it was gone entirely.

In the midst of it all, Oscar looked back at Aurelia and smiled with the baby, which had started crying, in his arms. "Looks like we did it."

Aurelia bowed her head, utterly astonished. "That was incredible! Let me see your injuries."

"Heal him first," Oscar replied, hurrying over with the baby, whose back was bleeding a little.

Aurelia quickly took the infant into her arms and intoned a healing spell. Oscar breathed a sigh of relief as he watched.

"There, that's sorted now... but we're not done yet," he muttered. While Oscar had gotten tangled up in a creepy forbidden curse, he still needed to find Tinasha.

Oscar glanced toward the distant fortress. The magistrates were probably worried, so it was best that he return to them first. Fortunately, the baby looked to be all right. Just as he was going to tell Aurelia his plan, he sensed someone new appear behind him.

"Oscar!" shouted a familiar voice frantically.

The word filled the king of Farsas with profound relief. He'd only just thought to search for Tinasha, and now here she was. He turned around, prepared to give her an earful of some kind, but froze when he saw the state she was in. "What... what the hell happened to you?!"

"Oh, I'll be fine," Tinasha said, flapping a hand dismissively.

No matter how you looked at it, she was a mess. Her dress was ripped to shreds in places and practically dyed red with blood. There was some sort of inexplicable sigil emblazoned on her chest. What concerned Oscar the most, however, was that the long hair he was so fond of had been hacked into a bob.

He stared at the choppy, uneven ends. "What *happened*?"

"Oh, uh, nothing? Anyway, what went on here?" she asked.

"Do you really think that will work?" he responded dryly, walking up to Tinasha and pinching her cheek.

"Aaahh, that hurts!" she squealed, even as she reached out to heal the burns on his skin. Aurelia watched the pair of them, wholly slack-jawed.

Once Tinasha was released, she finally noticed Aurelia and the baby in her arms. With her head tilted curiously, she inquired, "What's going on?"

"That baby had some leftover remnants of Simila sealed inside him," answered Oscar.

"He did?! O-oh, I see... I'm sorry I didn't catch that," Tinasha replied, sounding crestfallen.

"Don't worry about it. It's not your fault, and it wasn't too hard to fix," Oscar assured her, patting her head comfortingly. Then he turned back to Aurelia. "Thanks. You were a huge help."

"Oh, not at all. It was my pleasure," Aurelia said politely, curtsying to him. Then she turned anxious eyes on Tinasha.

"Aurelia's looking for the bastard. Who were you fighting with?" Oscar asked Tinasha.

"Oh, so Travis isn't back yet? Hmm... What if he lost?" Tinasha mused.

"Do you really think I'd *lose*? Think before you speak," chided a grumpy voice as the demon in question appeared behind Aurelia.

She whirled around. "Travis! Where have you been?!"

"I told you to be a good girl and wait for me. What could've possibly brought you all the way out here?" he questioned. The gentleness in his eyes belied his stern tone.

Aurelia rubbed her thumbs over the edges of his eyes. She hadn't seen him in so long. "I—I was worried about you, of course! Stupid!"

"I was completely fine. Unlike her." Travis smirked.

"You know, if you had such an easy time, you could've helped," remarked Tinasha, crossing her arms and giving Travis a look. Her exhaustion bled into her tone.

From that exchange, Oscar gleaned that Tinasha's opponent had not been Travis but some common enemy of theirs instead. He decided not to kill Travis today.

That said, he didn't intend to stop prying. Tinasha's face grew tight as she sensed the silent pressure emanating from the man next to her. Nervously, she glanced up at him and gave an excuse. "Umm, so basically, I owed Travis, and he asked me to help him."

"Not getting killed because your enemy changed their mind is hardly what I would call owing them," Oscar said sourly.

"Well, there were a lot of other things, too, you know..."

"And I'll hear all about them later," Oscar stated coolly. Tinasha looked abashed.

She recovered soon enough, however, and looked to Travis. "So does that mean it's all over now?"

The demon nodded. "Yeah, and I'll keep my promise. But wow, you got beaten to a pulp. She went pretty hard on you, huh?"

"She was really strong! Ugh, I want my hair back," Tinasha huffed, waving her arms in a fit of pique. She had already healed all her wounds, but she couldn't restore her locks.

As she watched Tinasha struggle—and fail—to pull back the hair tickling her face into some sort of ponytail, Aurelia bowed to her. "Um, I'm sorry Travis pulled you into this."

"You've got it all wrong," Travis cut in. "You should be thanking her, not apologizing. She stood in for you during that fight."

"She what?"

"Why did you have to say that?" Tinasha hissed, grimacing uncomfortably.

Oscar patted her head. "You just *had* to get involved."

"Urgh..."

Aurelia's eyes grew wide. It had never occurred to her that she was the one in danger, and she would never have guessed that this beautiful queen had agreed to take her place.

Noticing her discomfiture, Tinasha smiled and waved to indicate it was nothing. "You don't need to feel bad about it. Travis was the one at fault."

"I didn't do anything wrong," the demon king countered.

"You need to fix your whole lifestyle," Tinasha shot back.

"I already am," he grumbled. With a little wave of his hand, he made the mark on Tinasha's chest disappear. At the same time, her hair grew back to its original length. The three humans present were left stunned.

"Wow," Tinasha said.

"I'm pretty good at that stuff, you know. Let's just call it a little recompense for battling Phaedra. Aurelia, we're leaving now," Travis stated arrogantly. The girl looked up at him and nodded obediently.

At last, she would return home with him. Relief pulled her lips into a smile.

Travis pressed a gentle kiss to Aurelia's forehead, and the warmth of it filled her with deep comfort. It had always been like that, ever since she was young. And she wanted things to stay that way forever, if possible.

Aurelia offered the demon a bittersweet smile. Feelings she was helpless to express in words were building inside her. Perhaps that was happiness.

But right at that moment, a woman's voice muttered something.

"You... *tricked* me? It wasn't that woman? It was this little brat here?"

“Tinasha?!”

Tinasha clapped both hands over her mouth. Oscar stared down at her with concern.

A voice that wasn't her own had come out of her mouth. She twisted her body, trying to shake off the curse-like presence.

Her head throbbed terribly. It felt like it was going to crack open. An uncomfortably warm, muddy nausea surged within her.

“You little... You planned an aftershock?!” Travis shouted with clear panic.

Dizziness came over Tinasha. Something was crawling around inside her body.

Suppressing her malaise, Tinasha leaped into the air and teleported away. She reappeared in the sky far above the other three. Clutching her throat, she rasped out, “Get out of me... You have no place here!”

On Tinasha's final word, she made the magic in her body explode. After an impact that almost tore the young woman apart, a violent torrent of raw power struck her.

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Travis gazed up at the tiny speck in the sky that was Tinasha and cursed under his breath. “Dammit...”

“What just happened? Has she been possessed?” demanded Oscar, an ominous look on his face.

The demon king flung an answer back at him. “Not possessed. Phaedra can't do anything to her. It's just the very last bits of her. Nothing that little could seize Tinasha completely. The equilibrium of the demon realm must have been thrown off after the loss of two of its mightiest inhabitants. There'll be some aftershocks until things settle back to normal. That's why some of Phaedra's consciousness is lingering.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” Oscar pressed.

“Nothing. The dead can't come back to life. What Tinasha just did probably blew away the last of Phaedra, and as for the demon realm, those of us who remain are enough to maintain a new balance, so long as we don't touch anything. If we'd lost any more of us, then things would be different, but the death of two just means a temporary fluctuation in the current of power.”

Oscar frowned at that unsatisfactory explanation. “Then what are you worried about?”

“No one can stop the disruption, even if they're short-lived. Aftershocks will keep rolling through to try and fill the empty spots until a new equilibrium is reached. Power is pouring into Tinasha—the one who killed the demon. And unfortunately, no matter how high her magic tolerance is...”

An explosion sounded overhead. An incredible mass of magic emerged. In the center of it stood a beautiful woman.

Her long flowing black locks danced in the wind. In a voice as clear as a bell, she laughed loudly. "Ahhhhh... ha-ha-haa! A-ha-ha-ha!"

Tinasha's shrieking howls reached the ears of the three people below. The noise was downright unhinged and didn't resemble her usual demeanor at all. Oscar's eyes shot wide open.

Behind him, Travis shrugged. In a blasé tone, he remarked, "Ah, she's gone out of control."

Oscar and Aurelia had no words.

A light drizzle was falling, dampening her thin frame. Tinasha cast an annoyed glance at the raindrops on her shoulders. It was like she was burning on the inside. Her emotions were all muddled and chaotic; she didn't know whether to find it funny or infuriating. Her soul threatened to split into pieces, and she clutched at her throat.

"Ha-ha! Ha... ha-ha..."

Power was gushing forth unbidden. It poured into Tinasha ceaselessly, as though to reforge her from the inside out.

Tinasha touched her cheek; her fingers came away wet with tears. "Hmm?"

She had nothing to be sad about. She shouldn't have, anyway.

At present, she possessed enough heat inside her to sear away everything around, and that was all that should've mattered.

Tinasha glared at the gloomy, overcast clouds and the incessant precipitation. They were ruining what should have been a gorgeous view.

She snapped her fingers, and a blast of wind shot upward, sending all the clouds flying and clearing up the sky in the blink of an eye. Soft sunlight filtered down to earth.

"Excellent..."

Now things were a little better. She *hated* the cold. It made her feel like she'd been alone in an unfamiliar place.

Roughly wiping away the tears on her cheeks, Tinasha assessed the heat building within her. She wanted something, and she wanted it very badly, but she couldn't determine what.

That uncertainty left her wanting to destroy everything in her path.

She shook her aching head as her gaze darted around wildly. When it landed on the fortress of Ynureid, she scowled. "What an eyesore..."

Before she could cast a spell, someone suddenly roared at her from the ground below.

"TINASHA!"

His voice carried well. She cocked her head like a kitten, gazing at the man glaring at her from below.

Oscar and Aurelia were both dazed by Tinasha's ability to change the weather without any sort of incantation.

Travis scowled. She was growing more powerful than he'd imagined. It had reached a point that she now surpassed a forbidden curse, if only by a little.

"What do we do?" Oscar asked.

"Well... she's getting used to her magic. It should take about half an hour for her mind to gain control over the power. By then, the terrain around here might look pretty different, though," Travis replied.

"We just rebuilt that fortress," Oscar said sourly.

"So? Tell that to your lady," Travis retorted.

This was all too ridiculous. Oscar massaged his temples. Behind him, Aurelia had gone pale as she clutched the baby to her.

Travis patted her shoulder. "We'd better find some shelter. Wanna head back?"

"Hold on just a minute! Can't you do something to stop this?!" she cried.

"Not possible," Travis answered flatly. "Normally, she's about as strong as I am, but I could always handle her. Now, though? No way. I can't do a thing. Besides, children of the spirits—spirit sorcerers, that is—get the best of everything in this world. Letting her be is the best course of action."

Aurelia frowned at her guardian. "Come on. You sound like a coward."

"I just don't make a habit of overestimating my own abilities. I do what I can and nothing more. Killing Tinasha's about the only way of stopping her."

"Absolutely not!" Aurelia cried.

"Thought so," Travis responded, throwing his hands up theatrically.

Oscar threw him a stony glance, observing how this beautiful man seemed to be enjoying this somehow. He unsheathed Akashia again. "Then I'll do it."

"Are you out of your mind? Sure, Akashia can beat her, but getting too full of yourself's only gonna get you killed," said Travis.

"There's a way to restore her. Besides, I'd rather not rebuild that fortress for a second time. I'm going to get close to her, and you're going to help me," Oscar stated in a tone brooking no refusal.

Travis's lip curled scornfully, and Aurelia poked him in the back. At that, the demon nodded. "Fine. Do you mean get close to her physically?"

"Pretty sure I don't need any help getting close to her emotionally," Oscar shot back, and Travis burst out laughing.

While these two men were not on good terms by any stretch of the imagination, they worked out a simple order of operations and then set out to subdue the woman lingering in the skies.

Tilting her head to one side, Tinasha observed the man down on the ground. Irritation flashed in her dark eyes. "Who are you? Stop bothering me."

That cut Oscar deep. Keeping his eyes focused straight ahead, he asked Travis, "Has she lost her memories?"

"It's more likely they're all temporarily jumbled," the demon answered. "Phaedra's consciousness may be gone, but her emotions are probably still

there. She really, really hated mortals. If you make one wrong move, you'll wind up in the ground."

"No way am I gonna let that go unchecked. That's *my* fiancée up there," Oscar muttered. With his off hand, he gestured to Tinasha to come toward him. "Tinasha, I need to talk to you! Come down here."

"No. Go away."

"..."

Oscar smiled grimly at her immediate refusal. Her loathing for him was written all over her face; the dead demon queen's feelings truly were influencing Tinasha.

After a moment's thought, Oscar looked back up at her. "Come down here if you hate me so much. I'll fight you."

Tinasha's eyes grew wide upon being provoked so openly. She looked shocked and hurt, but only for a second. Then there was only anger. She leveled a finger at him. "Die then."

Five orbs of light shot from her digit, snaking through the air toward Oscar. He broke into a run and slashed with Akashia, cutting the first two magic spheres apart. Without spells to hold them together, the luminous globes dispersed.

The third and fourth orbs, racing at him from behind, exploded as soon as they touched Akashia.

Behind Oscar, Travis crossed his arms and smirked. "I'm getting tired of this. Just come down."

As Akashia cleaved through the final orb, an enormous pressure bore down on Tinasha from above.

"Hey!"

She crumpled in the face of the sudden attack, plummeting to the earth. However, before she collided with the surface, a colossal explosion boomed. A tremendous blast of air swept over the area.

Travis threw up a barrier to ward off the kicked-up dirt, and he sighed. "Come on, now. I just want to go home."

Tinasha glowered at him crossly while floating a little off the ground. That surprise attack had garnered her wrath. Oscar had never seen her dark eyes so filled with pure hatred. "So there's two of you... I see."

The woman was seething with fury, her emotions on the verge of burning anyone who so much as touched her. Still, Oscar stepped in closer to her. He touched the ring finger on his left hand, just to make sure. "Strictly speaking, I'm the one responsible for all this. Come here, and I'll get that poison out of you."

"I hate you," she replied, lifting a hand. A gigantic wall of compressed magic appeared in front of her. The white edifice was as thick as a real stone one and as tall as a castle rampart.

The other side of it was just transparent enough to reveal that it was knotted together with a roiling mass of dense, concentrated magical power.

"Go."

The wall moved toward Oscar, plowing through the ground and sending dirt flying in all directions. He set off at a run, sword in hand.

As the colossal, intricate mass of magic pressed in on him, Oscar swung Akashia down at it. The mighty wall capable of toppling everything it touched developed a giant crack.

Oscar slipped through that crevice and hurried closer. Tinasha frowned and snapped her fingers. A scalding flash of light formed behind Oscar. It pressed into his back, giving off sparks.

But without even looking behind him, Oscar sliced it to shreds. Embers flew off and landed on his arms, but the barrier Tinasha herself had placed on Oscar kept him safe.

The fluctuation in magic reverberated through her body, making her jolt. "AHH!"

"Come back to yourself, Tinasha."

"Y-you shut up!" she snapped resentfully. She cast a teleportation spell to escape up into the sky. However, Oscar had anticipated that and touched the ring on his left hand. The warp-blocking spell activated. Travis, who had finished eliminating the rest of the wall, whistled from behind.

Tinasha's eyes grew wide with astonishment before her face darkened with animosity. A huge amount of magic formed between her hands—a radiant golden orb. Tinasha carried it up into the air and hurled it down at Oscar. Realizing it was big enough to blow a crater in the earth, he stopped where he was and readjusted his grip on Akashia.

"GO AWAY FOREVER!"

The air crackled and sizzled. Oscar held the flat of his blade up against the radiant sphere. Akashia only held it in place for a second before splitting it in two.

By that point, however, Tinasha had conjured a black sword. The blinding orb had been a decoy, and she plunged at Oscar from above. Akashia easily repelled the incoming blade and dispelled it, though. Oscar caught hold of Tinasha's wrist and pulled her in; her face turned to a look of startled dismay.

Despite being presented with such a clear opening, Oscar hesitated for a fraction too long. Seizing her chance, Tinasha focused her gaze as she kicked him in the shoulder. She moved far back, riding the wave of a small burst of power.

Sighing as he looked down at the hand she had knocked away, Oscar heard Travis say, "You could've stabbed her in the stomach."

"If I did that, her guts would burst open," Oscar pointed out.

"So? Just do it. I'll heal them up later."

"But it'll still hurt like hell."

When Travis had blown a hole in Tinasha's abdomen, she'd writhed in agony even after restoring herself. Oscar didn't want to put Tinasha through that, nor did he want to jeopardize her ability to have children by forcing her to reconstitute her body tissue repeatedly.

A scream rent the air as the two men bickered.

"AAAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

The queen was caught in a fit of rage, tearing madly at her hair. A wild cry erupted from her tiny, battered frame. "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!"

She was like a child throwing a temper tantrum, though her screams were more heartbroken.

"I hate you! I'm sick of looking at you! Die! Die already, you liar! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" she cried, cradling her head in her hands as she burned with enmity.

Coldly eyeing the queen going insane from an over-infusion of pure magic, Travis said, "Phaedra's emotions are really doing her in. All we can do is beat her into submission and wait for it to subside."

"No," Oscar said.

What Travis suggested wasn't impossible. While Tinasha had all the power of a full-scale calamity, she wasn't in her right mind at present. Oscar and the demon could subdue her.

That didn't feel like the right way to go about it, however.

Oscar gazed at her tearstained face. When his eyes met her dark ones, he made up his mind. "It will be all right."

Akashia in hand, he stepped forward.

Tinasha shivered when she saw the weapon. She held her hands out in front of her to stop him from taking another step and started to pour magic into the space between them.

"I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!"

"Why do you hate me? Because I'm a mortal?" he asked.

"I hate you. You're a liar. I despise you."

"Well, I can't deny that I've lied to you," he admitted.

The muddled state of her emotions made it hard to tell where the demon ended and Tinasha began.

Bitterly, she shook her head. White light emerged from her hands, glowing brighter and brighter.

Pure, raw magic—enough power to wipe out thousands in an instant.

From behind, Travis piped up, "Watch out. You take that hit, and this whole region gets decimated."

Oscar didn't answer and instead kept his eyes trained on the woman before him as he moved nearer.

As destructive radiance spilled from Tinasha's hands, she turned a nervous gaze on him and snapped, "You didn't even want me. You're going to leave me."

"I'm not. I'm yours."

"I hate you," she said after a pause. A simple spell appeared between her palms. It possessed more than enough strength to annihilate a lowly mortal. All it would take was a thought. Scowling hatefully, Tinasha completed the spell.

A feverish, crazed look crossed Tinasha's face.

"Love me."

Seven rings flared into being. The pressure emanating from them was similar to Druza's forbidden curse, but more intense.

The massive spell flew from her hands, hurtling toward Oscar. He only felt a minor flash of worry as he leaped directly into the path of the attack, however. With a sharp exhale, he dug Akashia's blade into the interlocking spells.

Light exploded with such intensity that Oscar momentarily lost his sight.

Still, he cut away the spells on the outer edges as pressure seared into him. The hand gripping Akashia went numb. He was robbed of all sense of gravity. However, he continued undaunted, instinctually hacking away the sheer force pressing down on his body.

As he breathed out all the air in his lungs, he found himself standing before her. Gazing down at Tinasha, her face streaked with tears, Oscar smiled. "Is that what you've been worried about?"

Was that an emotion belonging to the dead demon woman? Or was it a wish Tinasha herself had kept hidden?

Either way, she was here with him now.

He cupped her face in both hands. "Tinasha, I *adore* you. You don't need to worry about that."

Her teary eyes widened a fraction. Gently, he lay the flat of Akashia against her ivory cheek. From that point of contact outward, magic diffused away.

As her breathing slowly calmed, Oscar pressed a kiss to the bridge of her nose and murmured, "Do you want me to feed it to you? Can you drink it yourself?"

Tinasha's long eyelashes fluttered. Her deathly pale cheeks turned a faint pink. "I'll drink it myself."

She held out a hand, and Oscar smiled tightly as he pulled a vial from his pocket and passed it to her. It contained water from the underground Lake of Silence located beneath Farsas Castle. Drawn from the pool that had created the royal sword, the water could neutralize magic.

Tinasha drained it in one gulp. When she fainted, Oscar took her in his arms. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Travis waving at them in the distance.

■ 10. Half of Eternity

Seated in a chair, Aurelia closed her eyes. Travis put his hand on her forehead. "You seriously can't just undo the seal like that, you little runaway. What am I gonna do with you?"

"*You're* the one who wouldn't come home," she said, sulking.

"I'm strong enough to take care of myself," he retorted, infusing his hand with magic.

Aurelia grimaced as she realized her powers had been shut away once more. Then her face clouded over. She turned her ashy blue eyes on Travis and asked, "Is it really true that you almost killed Queen Tinasha?"

"Did *he* tell you that?" Travis responded, his tone dismissive as he waved an annoyed hand. "Don't mind that. It's my business, so just forget it."

"I will not. Tell me the truth," she insisted, her gaze just as straightforward as it had been on the day they met. True to her proud spirit, she always carried herself perfectly upright and with the utmost grace.

Travis had known Aurelia for long enough to recognize when she wouldn't give up. He scratched at his scalp. "Well, all right, it's true."

"I... see," she replied.

Travis frowned, having expected the girl to lose her temper. "That's all? Don't hold back."

"I have plenty to say. I've always wondered why you saved me and how long you plan on staying with me. But none of that is worth fretting over," Aurelia responded, standing up to glare at Travis. "I know exactly what you are and how cold you can be. But if you're planning to keep sharing my life, you are no longer allowed to do anything bad like that anymore! You will learn how humans behave! If you do, I will bear half of your ridiculous sins!" she cried, her gray eyes glittering with purpose. She fixed him with that same gaze that could see into the past.

Astounded, Travis could only manage, "Do you... do you really mean that?"

"I wouldn't have said all that if I didn't! Don't you realize how long we've been together?"

He could have never imagined that she'd come out with that; she had left him speechless. Did she have any idea just how different their life spans were? There was no way she could know him, nor could she possibly be able to carry half of his sins.

The words seemed the foolish ramblings of a child.

And yet, Travis could feel himself wanting to cling to them. He needed Aurelia's strength. He needed her heart, even if he had to kill her for it. That was what he had thought once.

She wasn't the true fool here, though—he was. Travis didn't understand a thing about mortals. His touch wounded them. His interest corrupted them. Knowing that, he still elected to get involved with them for his own amusement.

Aurelia couldn't possibly comprehend what aligning herself with someone like him meant.

Travis cleared his face of surprise and asked, "Are you insane? You're going to end up ruined."

Gone was his usual teasing complacency, replaced with a loneliness as boundless and eternal as the night.

Aurelia's eyes narrowed a fraction as she recognized how hollow he had gone. Still, her own gaze didn't waver one bit. Every word cut Travis to the core as she stated, "Neither of us can know whether I'll end up ruined or happy. If you want me with you, I'll follow you all the way to hell."

Although the declaration was dramatic, she very clearly meant it.

Travis had never met anyone like her before. She was the only one.

The demon king stared at her so hard he could burn a hole right through the girl. She arched an eyebrow. "What? If you've got something to say, then spit it out."

"It's just... hmm. I'll concede this once that you've grown a little," Travis remarked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Aurelia complained, but the demon only grinned in reply.

Even Travis couldn't say how long they'd be together. One day, they might come to reject the idea.

Yet were that day to come, and they parted ways, her words just now had still saved his soul. Travis made up his mind to tell Aurelia that someday—when he looked back on this moment with deep longing. When that time finally came, he would honor this day.

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The rain gradually tapered off after dark. The white glow of the moon and stars peeked out from rifts in the clouds.

After dragging her battered self back to Tuldarr, Tinasha rushed through her paperwork and returned to her chambers. By the time she finished her bath and dried her hair, the sky had gone completely black.

Slumping over her table, Tinasha heaved a deep sigh. "Ohhh, I'm so tired..."

The nausea caused by the afternoon's events had largely receded, but she still couldn't use magic. Unlike when she fell in the Lake of Silence, she hadn't vomited up the water after imbibing it. She probably wouldn't be able to cast any spells for at least another two hours—when the clock chimed midnight.

As she mentally reviewed the awful day she'd suffered, Tinasha flushed bright red and buried her face in her hands. "I—I can't believe how embarrassing that was! Ugh!"

On top of sustaining the aftershock pouring immense power into her, she'd synchronized with Phaedra's emotions and lost control of herself.

Tinasha had said so many ridiculous things she would never have said out loud. Even she didn't know which parts were her feelings and which were Phaedra's.

"Love me."

It was such a childish jumbled-up ball of emotion, and she'd hurled it straight at him. It was so humiliating that she wanted to crawl into a hole and never come out.

However, Oscar had only shaken his head and accepted all of it.

"I'll need to give him a proper apology later..." Tinasha said. She held back another defeated exhale just as someone knocked on the door to her chambers. "Yes?"

"You have a guest, Lady Tinasha!" a spirit called brightly. Tinasha walked over to the door and opened it, not suspecting anything at all. Then she froze.

Standing before Mila, who was grinning mischievously, was her fiancé.

"Aaaaahhh! Why?! This is Tuldarr!" she exclaimed.

"Wow, that's quite a reaction. I can't believe you had the nerve to sneak out and scurry home while I was busy with work. I'm here to give you a lecture," he said.

"Ow, ow, ow!" she griped as he swept into the room, dragging her by the cheek. Mila wagged her fingers and shut the door behind them.

Oscar's heartless treatment left the queen with tears in her eyes. "I—I don't like this surprise visit."

"Did you really think you would get away with not telling me everything? I want the whole story."

"Urgh," Tinasha grumbled. She hadn't intended to keep it from him indefinitely, but she had hoped to at least delay his anger for a while.

The look on Oscar's face told her that he had reached his limit, though.

Rubbing at her sore cheek, Tinasha first apologized and then launched into an explanation of the events leading up to the day's battles. She wanted to conceal a few details, but every time she tried to gloss over things, Oscar's intuition led him to press her further. Ultimately, she told him just about all of it.

Pinched to within an inch of her life and breathing raggedly, Tinasha lay slumped over her table. In the seat across from her sat Oscar, wearing an utterly appalled expression. "Were you thinking clearly at all? You were under no obligation to risk your life for him."

"He spared my life when he could've ended it," Tinasha pointed out. "And then he offered to never meddle in Farsas or Tuldarr. It seemed like a very good arrangement."

"If you want to make sure he doesn't trouble us, I'll just go kill him myself," Oscar said.

"Wai... wait..."

Oscar and Travis had worked together to stop Tinasha, and she'd hoped that meant they were only on slightly better terms, but apparently, that was not the case.

Feeling at her wit's end, Tinasha stood up. "Um, do you want something to drink? I have some liqueurs."

"Are those here for you to drink?" Oscar asked.

"No, they're for decoration. The colors are very pretty," she replied, pointing to a row of bottles in a cabinet containing amber, golden, and ruby liquids.

All looked unopened, and Oscar eyed them from over Tinasha's shoulder. "All right, I'll have some of the amber one, second from the left."

"Okay. Do you need anything for it, or will you drink it straight?" she asked.

"Just over ice," he answered. Ordinarily, Tinasha would use magic to create some, but she couldn't do that at the moment. Instead, she poked her head into the antechamber where Mila stood guard and got the ice from her. As she struggled valiantly to open the bottle, Oscar plucked it from her and uncorked it himself.

After a sigh, Tinasha remarked, "I—I suppose I really can't do anything without my magic, can I...?"

"Now you know what it's like. I don't mind at all. In fact, feel free to drink that lake water every day," Oscar said.

"I—I don't know about that..."

While pouring a glass for himself, Oscar admonished Tinasha. "I don't know why you always decide to take on other people's messes in the first place. You need to learn how to say no."

"In Travis's case, I owed him a debt. He's the one who told me to put myself in a magic sleep," she explained, and Oscar's eyes grew wide.

Tinasha gave a tight smile. "It actually hadn't occurred to me at all to try to find you again... We belonged to different eras, and I had no proof that what you'd told me was true. But Travis told me it was better to give chase than to sit and rot. Bizarrely, he sounded like he didn't doubt the story at all. Now that I think about it, I wonder if he knew about Eleterria..."

For a moment, Tinasha's gaze turned very distant. It was a look she had often adopted when the two first met, one redolent of loneliness and homesickness.

But when she looked back up at Oscar, none of that was present in her expression. "But now I don't owe him anything anymore. I'm sorry for worrying you."

With eyes narrowed, Oscar responded, "I see."

Luck and coincidence were highly involved in how most people met one another. Yet it seemed like the two of them meeting was a miracle above all the rest, born out of some perilous destiny they shared. How would things have turned out if Tinasha hadn't met Oscar when she was young?

As his thoughts led him in that direction, Oscar frowned. "Why did I go back to save you?"

"What?"

"I'm just wondering what I jumped four hundred years into the past to do. Or was it just a fluke?"

Tinasha shifted uncomfortably to be asked that now, after so long. Reluctantly, she answered, "Because in this time period, I was originally your wife."

"You were my... *what?*"

"Urgh... I didn't want to tell you because I knew you'd react like this," she admitted.

Oscar was floored. While he still hadn't taken everything in, he reached across the table and caught up a lock of his sullen fiancée's hair. "What exactly do you mean by that? Why was I married to you?"

"I don't know! I guess your taste in women is just that bad!" she cried.

"That's not what I mean. I'm talking about the whole... born in different eras thing."

Born over four centuries apart, they were only together now because Tinasha had gone into a magic sleep to see Oscar. How had they been married in the previous timeline?

Tinasha crossed her arms and frowned. "I asked you the same thing a long time ago, but you wouldn't tell me. I don't think it was a lie, though, because you knew an awful lot about me."

"Something about this doesn't add up... Did he tell you to jump four hundred years ahead?"

"No. He told me that I'd never see him again because he'd changed history. I was about to be coronated, so he requested that I become a good queen," Tinasha replied, a forlorn smile on her lips. Her eyes, tinged with deep affection and loss, were turned to another man from the distant past. Her memories of that man—her sole comfort in those days—had propelled her through time and brought her here.

In sharp contrast, however, Oscar scowled. "That makes no sense. If you'd focused on being queen and hadn't abdicated, we would've never gotten to meet. He should've considered consequences more thoroughly."

"Look who's talking!" Tinasha exclaimed, then she flopped over onto the table.

Many coincidences had lined up so they could meet each other. Oscar was glad that he hadn't made any missteps. He gazed at his fiancée earnestly as he mulled all that over.

Noticing his stare, Tinasha gave him a smile. She stood up from her chair and came over to him. He set down his glass and pulled her onto his lap. "Well, you're going to be my wife anyway, so there's no real issue in the end. Still, you should have told me that in the first place."

"No way. You would have thought I was a complete weirdo if I told you I was your future bride when we first met. Honestly, I did think you were crazy after you told me that when I was a kid."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

Had Tinasha tried to explain that to the present Oscar, it really would have come off as suspicious. Unlike Oscar's earlier self, who probably knew everything about his wife's younger days, the only connection this Tinasha had to the previous Oscar was that he had saved her life. She didn't have enough to go on to prove that the two were married. Had she woken up and insisted they were a couple, it probably would have only succeeded in delaying their getting together.

As Oscar carded his fingers through Tinasha's long inky hair, he buried his face in it and inhaled the faint scent of her floral perfume. That scent of hers, her slender frame, her eyes like the abyss—all of it drew him to her and held him fast.

A little tipsy, he hugged her tightly. But then something occurred to him, and he looked up. "Tinasha, do you know what an insider is?"

"An insider? You mean... someone on the inside?"

"Right... What could that be referring to?" Oscar mused.

After Tinasha had recovered her senses, Travis had asked Oscar how he had gotten her under control. When he revealed that he'd given her magic-sealing water from the lake, the demon king responded, "Ah yes, the insiders' lake."

At the time, Oscar didn't think much of it, but once Travis was gone, he remembered he'd heard that word somewhere once before. *Insider*.

But for the life of him, he couldn't recall where.

Tinasha must have had no idea, either, because her wide black eyes blinked at him curiously. He patted her head and dropped the subject. "Never mind. It's not a big deal."

"I'll ask Travis the next chance I get," she said.

"No, you won't. I don't want you seeing him again."

"Y-you really hate him, huh?" Tinasha sighed, but there was nothing to be done. It would be much weirder if the two of them *did* get along.

Oscar caught a glimpse of her black eyes widening a little.

"Oh? Did the lake water just wear off?" he asked.

She opened a hand and cast a spell. After inspecting her own exquisite handiwork, she nodded. "Everything seems to be fine."

"So you can use magic?"

"I can. It's all back," she confirmed.

"Okay, then. Whenever you have a free moment, could you redo the spell on this?" Oscar requested, taking off the ring on his left hand and handing it to Tinasha. With a dry laugh, she took it from him.

She certainly hadn't imagined that she would be the first person Oscar used the ring on. Still, it had worked. The silver lining was the fact that the ring had led to her getting pacified faster.

"I'll recast it now, since we don't know what might happen," Tinasha said, and she began the incantation. After five long minutes, the ring was enchanted again, and Tinasha placed it back on Oscar's finger.

"Thanks," he said.

"It's no problem. It was me who made you use it, after all," she replied with a bitter smile. Oscar pressed a kiss to her forehead. Her eyes went half-lidded like a cat's as he stroked her hair.

Then Oscar got to his feet, helping Tinasha stand as well. "All right, I'll be heading back now. You must be exhausted, so get some good sleep tonight."

"What? You're leaving?" she asked, gazing up at him with the innocent eyes of a little girl. Oscar narrowed his eyes, confident she didn't even realize what she was saying.

A smile formed on his face, and he kissed her. "I worry if I don't come to check on you regularly. I only came to make sure you're okay."

He didn't say that he was troubled about her not being able to use magic and wanted to see how she was faring, because it was the same as stating that he was thinking of her. And Tinasha surely knew that already.

Tinasha's eyes went a little wide and she dimpled with happiness. "I love you. I really don't hate you at all. That wasn't real."

"I know," Oscar replied.

And because of that, the two of them would walk hand in hand on their own paths toward their shared future.

※

They didn't yet know about the dark intentions and magic that were slowly corrupting nations.

The seed had been planted very surreptitiously.

It was only the most fragile of creatures. As it dozed peacefully, unknown to all, it slowly grew roots. Those roots would eventually stretch far underground, while a sprout would breach the surface.

Everything was progressing slowly and hazily, like something out of a dream.

Once they saw that radiantly blooming flower, they would know for the first time that it was truly too late.

Such would be the beginning of the final revolution.



Afterword

Hello, I'm Kuji Furumiya. Thank you very much for reading *Unnamed Memory*, Vol. 5! After Act 1, which spanned a year across three volumes, we've reached the middle of Act 2.

The next book will conclude this tale of Oscar's and Tinasha's destinies. This volume can be considered something of a brief moment of tranquility, so I hope readers will relax and enjoy it.

We're experiencing a year in Oscar's and Tinasha's lives for the second time, now that history has been rewritten. With the truth of the curse revealed after so long and Valt taking center stage, you may have realized what this story is centered on. This is a tale of revolution for historical eras and the world itself. I do hope you'll stick with me until the end.

Babel I, the first of my other series set in the same universe, was published in Japan concurrently with *Unnamed Memory*, Vol. 5. It's the story of Shizuku, a Japanese college student who wanders into another world—one with magic—and sets out to find her way back home. She's an ordinary girl, not a powerful witch or sword user, and she meets a mage without much magic who's chosen to specialize in research.

It takes place three hundred years after *Unnamed Memory*, but you can read both series alongside one another and be fine. You may see a few countries whose names you recognize and wonder, "Hmm, how did that happen?" That's a special treat for readers of both stories, so I do hope you'll enjoy it.

Finally, I have many people to thank.

Thank you so very much to the editors who are always supporting me! When you first told me you wanted to publish two volumes at the same time, I laughed and thought it was a funny joke. But we made it work somehow, and that's all because of your direction and guidance. I'll continue to do my very best.

To chibi, thank you for the extremely beautiful illustrations in all five volumes so far! The detailed, intricate cover art took my breath away, and the solo drawing of Simila was so exciting. A snake! A big snake! I believe

the world of *Unnamed Memory* wouldn't be what it is without chibi's art. Thank you so very much!

To Tappei Nagatsuki, thank you for always supporting this series! Even though you're very busy, you're there to encourage me whenever I reach out to you. There's only one volume left, so let's do our best to bring it home!

Finally, I am eternally grateful to all the booksellers and readers. Thanks to you, *Unnamed Memory* ranked No. 1 in the trade paperback category of the Light Novel Fan Booksellers' Awards 2020. I will use that as inspiration to do my absolute best so that even more people learn about these books and so that existing fans enjoy them even more than before.

We'll meet again somewhere in an era in a land of magic. Thank you so much!

Kuji Furumiya

Extra

Perchance to Dream

To be a monarch in the Dark Age, an era of war and betrayal, meant many different things.

A protector as well as a conqueror. Those who reigned as well as those who were cast aside. According to recorded history, the king with the shortest reign was murdered immediately after coronation.

In those days, the one on the throne needed to keep all of that in mind—if, that is, there was something they wanted to accomplish during their rule. “Lady Tinasha, you’re covered in blood again,” Lilia remarked upon Tinasha’s return to her chambers. Tinasha gave a weary nod. Splashes of crimson marred the front of her white mage’s robes.

As she headed for the bathroom, Tinasha said flatly, “Lots of executions today. I need to get these stains out...”

“You should have a proxy do executions for you. Someone or other will always be sending assassins after you,” Lilia advised.

“Yes, which is exactly why I need to strike fear into their hearts,” the young queen said tartly. She was only seventeen. As the most powerful mage with more magic than anyone alive, she alone qualified to sit upon the throne of the Magic Empire in this Dark Age. “And with executions, people start to blame the executioner. If I had someone do them for me, things would only get even more complicated,” the queen explained.

“So it’s all right for you to become the object of their hatred?”

“That’s what a ruler does,” Tinasha said as she strode into the bathroom, slipping off her bloodstained robes and getting into the steaming water. After rinsing the blood from her skin, she washed her robes in a bucket of water.

Events like this one had become common since her coronation. It had practically become habit. She had ascended to the throne by dint of Lanak’s insanity and forbidden curse, meaning that she was the target of constant hostility and perpetually in danger.

But a weak, powerless monarch was not fit to rule at all. That was how things operated in that era and in Tuldarr itself.

After languishing in her bath, Tinasha returned to her bedroom. She lived in the spacious chamber all alone. There had only been one month in her life when she'd had someone by her side. During that time, everything felt so natural and warm. She would go to sleep feeling protected and happy.

So when she lay on her huge bed alone, she couldn't help the waves of loneliness that would sweep over her. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes, but she squeezed them tight and wouldn't let herself cry.

Just before falling unconscious, she would reach out—but no one was there. He was gone.

So she would go to sleep with the half-formed hope in her heart of at least seeing him in her dreams.



"Ah, Oscar?" she cried, jerking awake from a shallow sleep. She looked around the large bed.

It was still the middle of the night, and no one else was there. She was alone. It had felt like someone had grabbed her hand, but it was just a dream in the end—one she'd had many times now.

When she went to wipe away the wetness from her eyes, a sense of unease suddenly struck her.

"Hmm?"

The room was different. While it was still one belonging to the queen of Tuldarr, it was a new room built in the past four centuries. Tinasha rubbed at her temples as she sorted jumbled memories.

She still felt uneasy, so she opened up a teleportation array leading to a set of coordinates she knew by heart.

For Oscar, it was entirely natural to be asleep in a large bed in the middle of the night. He couldn't rest with someone next to him.

He had gone to bed as he did every night, alone. Half dreaming, half conscious, he had reached out—only to catch hold of someone's hand. The person let out a yelp.

Unconsciously, he wrested that hand closer to him. The sound of her astonished cry had woken him. "Mmm? What are you doing here? What's happened?" he asked his fiancée with some surprise. She should've been in the next country over.

"Y-you weren't asleep?" came a question in reply.

"I was halfway there. Is something going on? I can get up," he said.

"No, you don't need to," she replied, curling up next to him like a cat. Judging by the white nightgown she was wearing, it couldn't have been a crisis.

Tinasha put her arms around Oscar and closed her eyes. "Let me stay here. I'll go back in the morning."

"Did you have a scary dream?" he asked.

While she was a coolheaded queen from four hundred years in the past, she occasionally acted like a needy child in front of him.

Sighing ruefully, he stroked her hair as she pressed her soft body closer to his. Her eyes went half-lidded as she gazed up at him. "I want to sleep with you."

"That's all you have to say for yourself after coming here?"

The statement could mean many different things, but knowing Tinasha, the most direct meaning was the intended one.

Her eyes were already fluttering closed. As she squeezed her arms tightly around him, Oscar resigned himself to his fate. He had been drifting off to sleep himself, so he gave her back a gentle pat. "All right. Good night, then."

"Also, wake me up at five in the morning tomorrow..."

"Hold it," Oscar interrupted, reflexively catching hold of the soft flesh of her earlobe.

Tinasha gazed up at him with big, piteous eyes. "What...?"

"Get up on your own. Don't make me do it," he said. Once Tinasha fell asleep like this, she would usually not wake until after noon. Shouting at her and shaking her would do no good. It would be like she was rooted to the bed itself. All anyone could do was wait for her to rise on her own.

If Tinasha put the task of waking her on Oscar, it would significantly throw off his schedule for the entire day. He gave a light tug to her ear. "Listen. You need to get up. *Without* me dragging you out of bed."

"Mm-kay..."

"Hey! Don't go to sleep! Maybe I should just keep you up all night if you have to get up that early," Oscar suggested, though his threats were empty and had no effect on her anyway. She had already drifted off.

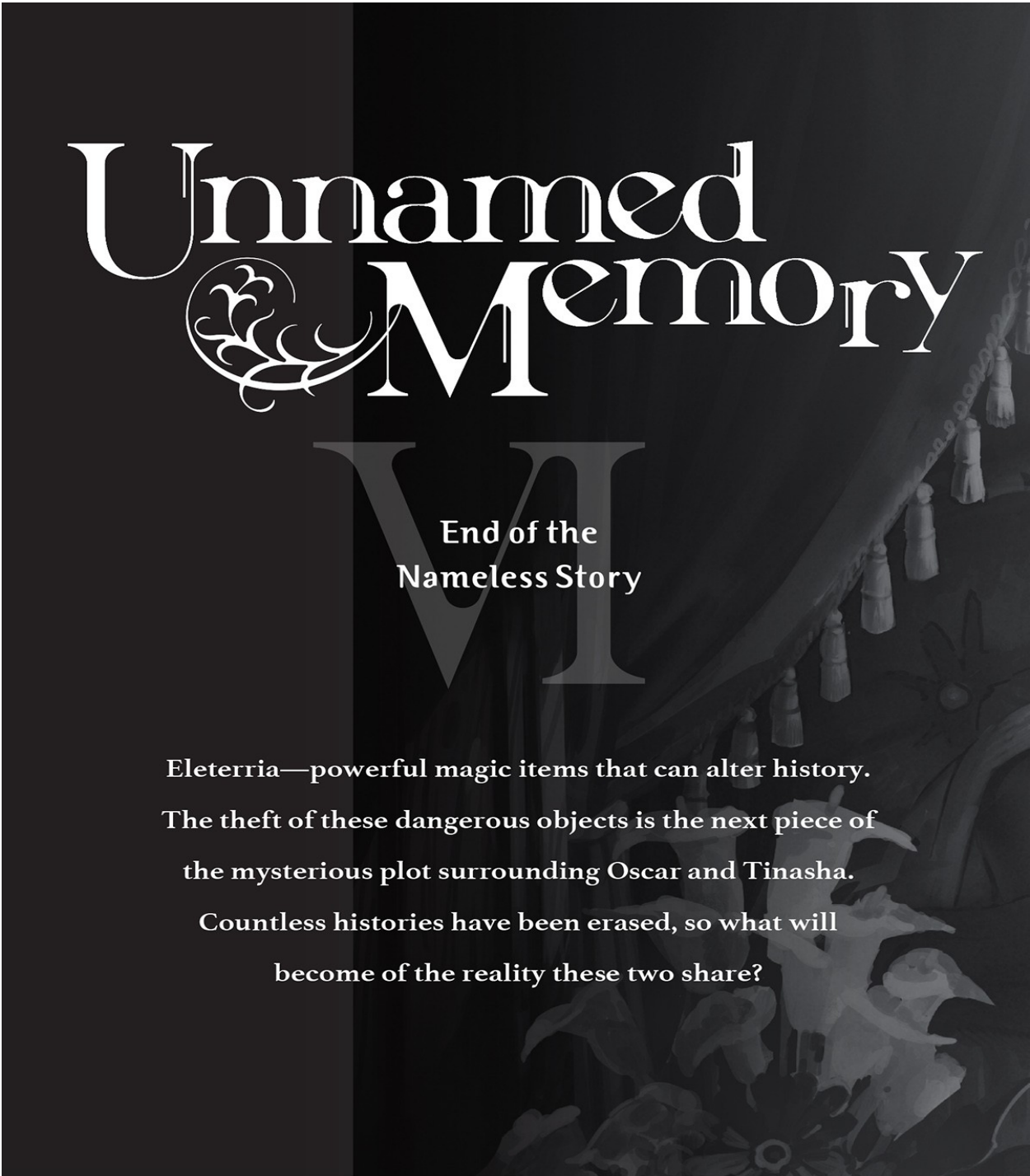
It had all happened so fast. Oscar was left speechless. "Unbelievable... Who does this?"

She was like an intractable child, but he couldn't do anything about it; that was just how much she loved and adored him.

Oscar sighed, suppressing the desire growing within him. After one last stroke of Tinasha's hair, he shut his eyes.

If only his beloved would fall asleep at peace and free from the demons of her loneliness.

With that wish in his heart, Oscar passed into a dream.



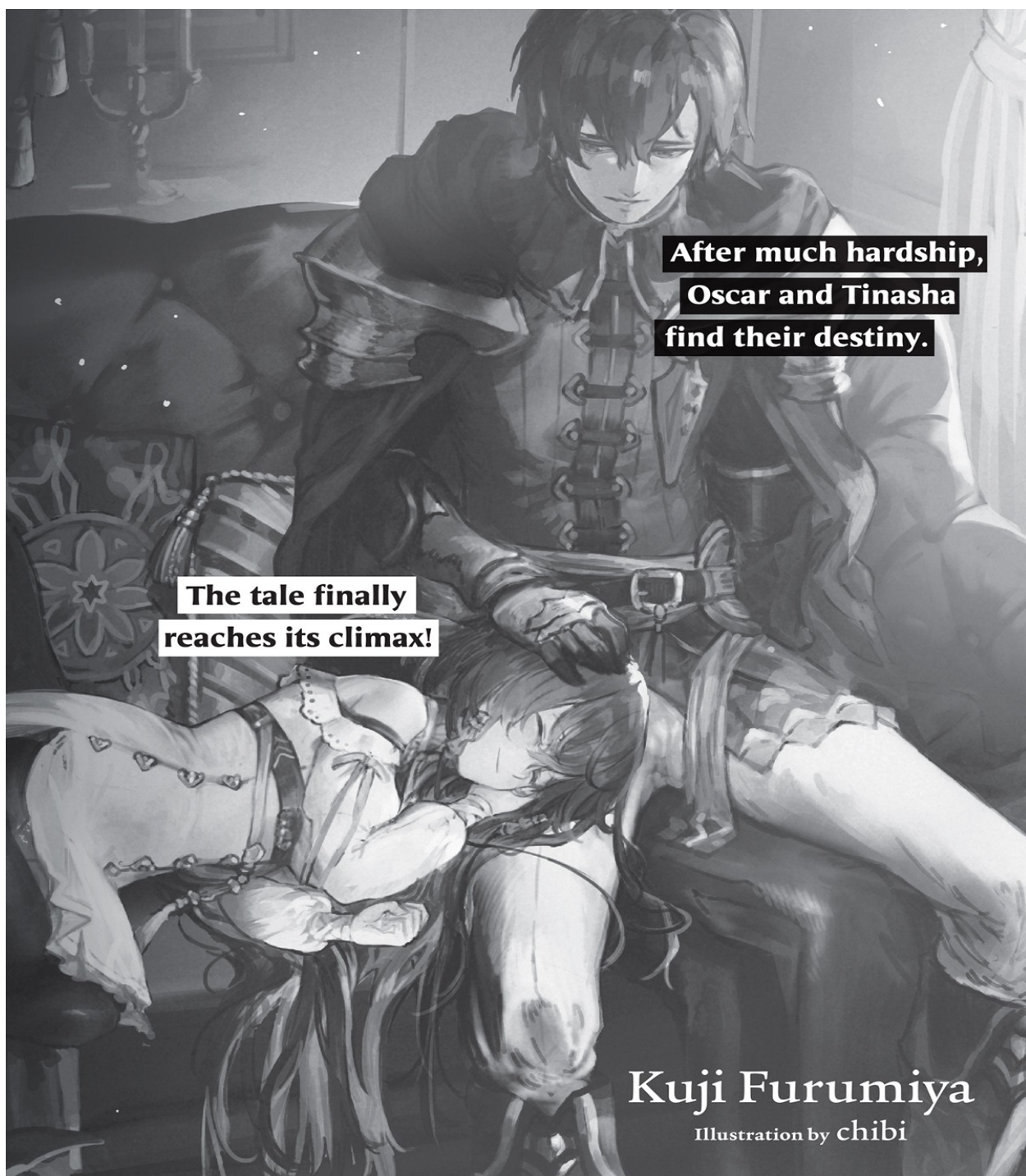
Unnamed Memory

VI
End of the
Nameless Story

Eleterria—powerful magic items that can alter history.
The theft of these dangerous objects is the next piece of
the mysterious plot surrounding Oscar and Tinasha.

Countless histories have been erased, so what will
become of the reality these two share?

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Kuji Furumiya
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Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Insert](#)
3. [Title Page](#)
4. [Copyright](#)
5. [Character Profiles](#)
6. [1. Shellwork Memory](#)
7. [2. Moon Crystals](#)
8. [3. Returning the Promise](#)
9. [4. The Crystal Orb's Enchanted Sleep](#)
10. [5. Contagious Hopes](#)
11. [6. Bloodless Scars](#)
12. [7. A Happy Kind of Sadness](#)
13. [8. Finding a Seed](#)
14. [9. The Present According to the Future](#)
15. [10. Half of Eternity](#)
16. [Afterword](#)
17. [Extra: Perchance to Dream](#)
18. [Yen Newsletter](#)